

let these hills absolve me

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by [flowersferns](#)

Summary

It should have been a no-brainer, really. Ghost should have balked at the thought of spending time in close proximity to any of his colleagues, let alone the one man that he actually had the potential to disappoint. That was his rule — distance meant safety.

It should have been an easy answer.

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When the news of three weeks' forced leave reaches Ghost, he's resigned himself to loneliness in an empty base. That is, until a certain Sergeant offers him an invitation he just can't seem to refuse.

Or: the sheep farming fic nobody asked for

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

poking ghoap nation with a stick WAKE UP PEOPLE

I've been working on a farm as of late and every day that I'm there this story has been cooking itself up in my brain, so I figured I'd finally just write it. So here it is, the most ridiculous thing I've ever written: two military propaganda characters take on the illustrious agri business that is sheep farming. Also there's a slow burn romance. Jesus Christ.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I'm not going home."

It was a finality that solidified itself before Ghost even opened his mouth. He knew it, deep in the marrow of his bones, a feeling more instinctual than words.

He couldn't go back there. Not to that place.

"Gotta go somewhere, son."

Price regarded him as he spoke, his own letter tucked under folded arms.

Ghost was too old, too tired for his fatherly stance to placate him, so all he was left with was an uncomfortable curdling sensation in his gut.

"Look, I understand where you're coming from. You can try and take it higher if you want, I won't stop you, but we all knew it was coming."

The Captain's voice toed the line between exhaustion and complete apathy, a combination which made the final decision written in the printed-off emails doled out to the 141 even more rational.

Three weeks' leave. Non-negotiable.

Ghost cursed whichever twat had let the wrong file slip into the wrong hands and made their last operation dissolve into a puddle of shit. He wasn't sure which part of the trainwreck that was their last op had

warranted the decision, but either way, chain of command had waved its divine hands and demanded the hardest task of all from them.

Rest.

Honest to God rest, not the half seconds of stillness they experienced on base between missions, always wound up and strung out with anticipation.

He couldn't imagine anything worse.

It wasn't that he particularly *loved* being on base— there were things he liked about leave. Shower gel that smelled of something. Towels that didn't make him feel like he was drying off with 80-grit sandpaper. But most of these things, small frivolous luxuries, were things he had long since learned to forgo.

Thinking of the silence of his empty apartment was already suffocating him— he didn't need a soft bed or silverware, what he needed was *war*. Ghost needed the debasement of it all, the grit, sweat and blood, the terror, how uncaring it all was. After all, if the conditions he lived and breathed by were dire enough that he didn't feel human, he never had to confront the reality that all he was, essentially, was a shell running from his own sense of self.

Ghost scrubbed a hand across the back of his head, feeling the seam of his balaclava.

“Christ. I'll deal with it,” he grumbled.

Price gave him a half-smile that verged on a grimace. “Might be good for you, you know,” he said.

Ghost liked Price. He was an upstanding man, well-adjusted in the sense that he could keep his opinions separate from his orders. He was respectful, and Ghost appreciated respect. But something about their interactions always set his teeth on edge, tugging at something immovable inside him. Kindness, the intrinsic kind that came with Price's leadership, was wasted on someone like him. It was like stretching your hand out to a beaten dog and expecting warmth beneath your palm, instead of feeling hungry canines meeting the bones within your flesh. It was a blind eye to bared teeth.

Ghost left before Price noticed how he'd bristled, the door swinging shut behind him.

The day had wound down around him while he was in the Captain's office, leaving the halls mercifully empty. He passed the mess hall, content to wander and stew in his irritation for a while. The echoes of his footsteps did a pretty piss-poor job of taking his mind away from the present moment, but it was better than lying awake in his bunk, waiting for fitful sleep to rile his mind up further.

Ghost headed for the east wing and pushed through the doors of the back entrance, slinking along the edge of the running track by the side of the building.

The cool bite of the evening air was a welcome sensation, even with his balaclava on, and Ghost breathed it in deeply, feeling the stretch in his lungs.

He wished, sometimes, that he could exist in a space without constantly feeling like the walls were closing in around him. Being outside was the only thing that seemed to alleviate the sensation, a brief snatch of that untethered freedom he constantly craved.

Keeping an eye out for passing guards— the lads would be at the beginning of their night shift, still rife with pent-up energy— Ghost rounded the far corner of the building and stopped, looking out onto the city below.

He leaned against the wall, feeling the bite of rough brick against the back of his head.

This was the closest thing he had to his own space. The only part of the entire base that didn't feel like a too-small cage slowly squeezing the life out of him. He took another deep breath, tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

If he had been a slightly different man, Ghost might have lit a cigarette, some blithe excuse to stand in the cold and the quiet by himself. But he was too cagey, too raw and wary for a vice like that, so he simply breathed, soaking in the silence.

"Hiding from somethin', are we?"

Johnny's voice was a bucket of ice water down Ghost's back, forcing him back into reality. Luckily, he had enough composure— or simply the lack of energy— not to jump out of his skin at the sound, but his eyes flicked to the sergeant anyway.

"Fucking hell, Soap. Bit of warning next time, yeah?"

Johnny stood in front of him, arms folded and eyes alight.

“Apologies, Lt,” he laughed. “I wasn’t huntin’ for you, swear.”

Ghost surveyed him for a long moment, letting his eyes run the length of his body. If Johnny could tell, he didn’t react.

“Figured as much,” Ghost murmured, skating the line between real and feigned disinterest.

A part of him squirmed at Soap’s comment, something close to disappointment bubbling in his chest. It was a pathetic feeling, being around Johnny, the only man who might have actually noticed Ghost’s absence in the base.

“Oi, now don’t make me sound like a bad guy for not looking,” Johnny said. “I had a feeling you might be broodin’ over being put on leave.”

Ghost could feel heat that radiated off him when Soap joined him by the wall.

“Brooding,” Ghost repeated, the word bone-dry in his mouth. “I’m not brooding.”

Johnny laughed again, an easy, malleable sound. Ghost hated the effect it had on him. It was a sound that siphoned something from Ghost’s chest, making him feel lighter and a little less like he was made of stone.

“Oh aye,” Soap said, eyes on him again. “So you’re headed back to Manchester?”

Ghost watched him. “Not Manchester. Flat’s in London.”

“London? Now there’s a surprise.”

Ghost cleared his throat and watched the sun as it bordered the horizon, unsure of how to respond.

London was an ugly, heaving beast of a place, but he hadn’t thought especially hard about the location when he’d moved— Manchester was suffocating and London was convenient in its carelessness. The city swallowed him, the same way it did everything else, and Ghost could just about survive there. No one spoke out of turn, which suited him just fine. He allowed himself to blend into the grey-white

pebbledash of London's houses, its people, its skies. Nothing thrived, nothing grew, but it was perfect for survival.

Or at least, it used to be.

He thought of his grim bedsit, with its lime-washed walls and empty cupboards. He thought about the small, grumbling want, that inexplicable hunger that grew in his chest, day by day.

"I'm not going. I can't. Gonna stay here," he said.

Soap's gaze was heavy in Ghost's periphery.

"Why?"

That was just like Johnny. He took whatever Ghost threw at him and never flinched, always ready to know more. It should have been awful. Ghost should have hated him for it.

"Why can't I go back, or why am I staying here?"

"Same question, really." Soap twisted his body until he was leaning his shoulder against the wall, facing him.

It was dangerous, how easy Johnny made it for him to be honest. Ghost was a creature that survived by stoicism and calculated lies. He had nothing, if not his secrecy. But something magnetised him in Soap's presence—the man drew him in and forced himself into Ghost's thoughts until nothing was sacred, nothing couldn't be divulged.

"Don't know really." His voice was gruff as he spoke. "Just feel like, if I went back—"

He faltered. One brief opportunity to save face. It was wasted on him.

"All that empty space... it would drive me mental. I can't do it, Soap. It's bloody well bad enough here, as is."

The words lingered in the space between them, the silence dutifully shuffling aside to allow the confession that burned within his words to take shape in the air.

That one awful, pitiful truth.

I am alone.

“I know what you mean, aye,” Johnny said softly.

Ghost wondered how much truth there really was to that statement. If that cavernous, hollow feeling in his chest was one that Johnny had shared before. If loneliness was even strong enough to describe it, this desperate emptiness inside him, less of a feeling and more of an urge, like an itch that existed below the surface of his skin. It mocked him constantly. It spat on his attempts to adjust.

There was a long stretch of silence before Johnny continued, injecting lightness into his tone.

“Staying here’s no’ gonna help anything, you know.”

Ghost heaved a sigh.

“Got nowhere else *to* go.”

There it was again, that same confession, beating itself into shape in his ribcage.

I am irretrievably alone.

“Easy,” Johnny ventured, smile ringing clear in his words. “Come with me.”

Easy, he said. Like it was nothing at all. Like Ghost’s chest didn’t cave in at his words.

As a rule, Ghost didn’t have friends. It was less a conscious decision and more of an immovable fact of his life— Simon Riley, *the ghost*, was made of hostile material. He didn’t suit friendship, the same way he didn’t suit kindness. It had become a principle, one of the pillars that held him upright.

But when it came to Johnny, Ghost found that those pillars crumbled into salt and sand, and that the foundations he’d built himself on were actually just as hollow as the rest of him.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ghost grumbled.

“I’m bein’ serious!” Johnny laughed. “I mean it, Ghost. Come with me to Scotland. I, ah...” he looked away without finishing, suddenly bashful. “I could actually use your help.”

“How could you *possibly* need my help?” Ghost asked. His skillset was pretty limited when he considered the correct side of legality.

“I’m...doing some work for a friend who owns a farm up in the southern highlands. Ye’d be right welcomed there, honest.”

Ghost blinked at him. “Not a chance, mate.”

Johnny pushed away from the wall, coming to stand in front of Ghost. He folded his arms. “Come on, you’ll love it. It’s fuckin’ stunning up there, huge hills an’ so much wildlife, and—“ he paused for dramatic effect, cocking his head. “There won’t be anyone to bother you, not fer miles around.”

“ ‘cept you.”

Johnny lit up, a rough laugh ringing in his words. “Is that a yes?”

Ghost averted his gaze, looking beyond Soap and back out into the city. The sun was fully set now, and streetlights were slowly beginning to blink on, casting a soft orange haze against the blue-grey of twilight clouds.

It should have been a no-brainer, really. Ghost should have balked at the thought of spending time in close proximity to any of his colleagues, let alone the one man that he actually had the potential to disappoint. That was his rule — distance meant safety.

It should have been an easy answer.

“I’d like it more if you were there, anyway,” Johnny said, suddenly soft again.

Ghost inhaled slowly and pushed past the tightness in his throat. “Alright then. Fine. Show us what Scotland’s all about.”

One of the pillars inside him collapsed.

—

Ghost expected the trip to be painful, but like most things when it came to Johnny, he was surprised. They passed hours in comfortable silence, Johnny pointing out the occasional landmark, Ghost content to stare out the window and scan the horizon. He found no trace of the cagey awkwardness that usually clung to his skin in periods of forced proximity— there was only the quiet hum of the engine, the periodic *clunk* of Johnny shifting gears, and, as they headed further north, the sparse, occasional patter of soft rain on the windshield.

Ghost watched the road signs pass by through the window and let the methodical tick of the car's indicator lull his mind to a standstill.

Johnny hummed quietly as he followed the road.

"Ever been this far north?" he asked.

Ghost thought for a moment. "'Dunno. Maybe. Got sent to Edinburgh once."

"Oh yeah?"

"Some administrative thing. Bloody nightmare."

Johnny chuckled. "And wha' was yer verdict on our shining capital?"

Ghost tried to remember his visit. He'd passed by what seemed like thousands of cobbled streets and tall, leaning stone buildings on his way to an office that was so decked-out in gilt that it made him feel like a grease stain on the white shirt of bureaucracy. The place had had crown mouldings, for god's sake.

He couldn't recall the details of the actual purpose of his visit — just that he'd been coming off the tail end of a 36-hour stint of wakefulness and the window of his hotel room hadn't latched properly, so the novelty of it all had been somewhat lost on him.

"...not my kind of city," he concluded after a beat.

"Ah, didnae think so. You don't strike me as the type for tourism."

He liked the way Soap said that word, *tourism*. *Too-rism*. Like it was sharp around the edges, ready to bite him as it parted his lips.

There it was again, that quiet subversion of his expectations that Johnny seemed to draw out of him. By all accounts, the accent should have been grating in his ears, but instead, he felt a spark of fondness glow in his chest.

He tried his best to tamp down the feeling.

"God," he grunted in response to Johnny's observation. "Pretty sure I got tinnitus from all those fucking bagpipes."

That elicited a proper bark of laughter from the driver's seat. Ghost allowed himself a single, quick glance at Johnny as he laughed.

It was almost funny. Ghost had really thought he'd won — that he'd managed to cauterise the parts of his brain that yearned for connection, the parts that warmed to recognition. In basic he'd learned that the liver could regrow itself back from a 70% loss. Maybe the brain was the same. Maybe his emotions were capable of remoulding themselves into shape around their jagged edges, to heal into knotted keloid masses despite his attempts to tear them to shreds.

Either way, his *best* was a parameter he'd definitely have to work on.

He returned to the view of the landscape and they lapsed back into silence.

As they bypassed more sparse villages, the road grew steadily smaller, and they began to climb into the mountains.

The view was breathtaking. Afternoon had come and gone and by now the light was beginning to wane, golden forks of evening sunshine penetrating the grey horizon and bathing the mountain peaks in warm, buttery light.

Ghost rarely paid attention to scenery. He bounced around the globe too often to be impressed by varying landscapes. But this, high peaks and plummeting valleys, sheer rock faces and deep purple heather, was a sight he drank in greedily. Perhaps it was the understanding that all of this belonged to Johnny somehow that struck his interest—that all of this was as much a part of him as the soulless, stone-walled streets of Manchester were a part of the miserable tapestry that made up Ghost's being.

Johnny cleared his throat, jolting Ghost back into reality.

"Ah..I meant tae ask," he said. His voice was tentative enough to strike wariness in Ghost's mind.

"How'dye feel about sheep?"

There was a long pause as Ghost turned bodily in his seat to stare at Soap. Johnny avoided his gaze, eyes trained on the road ahead. The only indicator of his thoughts were his fingers drumming tunelessly on the steering wheel, a rhythmic gauge of the seconds that slipped by.

Eventually, Ghost found his voice.

"Are- are you taking the piss?"

“Ah... no?” Johnny replied.

The half-smile that played on his lips suggested otherwise.

“This farm- I reckon I probably should’a told you a wee bit more before but...”

Ghost’s mouth set into a firm line beneath his balaclava. “But what?”

“Just.. y’know, didnae wanna scare you off.”

Ghost found it drily amusing that of all the horrors Johnny and he had shared, the one thing he’d decided would be too much for Ghost to handle was a farm in the back arse of nowhere, Scotland.

“So it’s a sheep farm, then?” He deduced.

Johnny glanced at him from the driver’s seat. “Aye, yeah. Friend of mine has a flock of about 200. Usually she runs it alone, but since I had the time to spare... an’ you, I s’pose... figured she could use a hand. Hope that’s alright.”

Ghost shrugged. “Got nothin’ against ‘em.”

It was true, although his only real experience with sheep had been on the butcher’s block, learning to methodically take them apart. At the time, he hadn’t thought especially hard about them as animals, just recognising the landmarks of where he needed to cut. It had been easy to him— that had been a time before he’d had to question the limits his values could take to still keep him alive.

Sometimes, in the thick of a fight on the field, the smell came back to him. That same iron-tasting air that coated the inside of his lungs when he breathed, the smell of fresh, deliberate death that clung to him.

He decided not to tell Soap.

The indicator chirped softly again and the car turned off the main road, following a winding path higher into the mountains. Ghost was quietly thankful that he wasn’t behind the wheel — the road guards had given way and all that was left separating the narrow track from the sheer face of the mountain was a sparse row of stones. He didn’t care about heights, but the sight of the sudden end of the drivable surface so close to him still made his stomach flip a little. He tried his best to take comfort in the fact that Johnny was decidedly a better

driver than he was, ignoring the small twinge his ego took at the thought.

It wasn't long after the sun began to set that Johnny pulled the car up another side road, the turn sharp enough to jerk Ghost out of the half-sleep he'd sunk into.

"Almost missed the fuck'n turn," he said through gritted teeth. "Anyway. This should be it."

The car rolled into a courtyard that time had clearly forgotten about. Cobbled stones, fringed with moss and sprouting green leaves, spread across a yard walled in on either side with small limestone-white cottages. The outline of a barn with a glazed tin roof stood out against a backdrop of fiery evening light behind the buildings. The whole thing was so grotesquely idyllic that Ghost could have laughed — a part of him felt too dirty to belong here, too wrong to take part in a scene as beautiful as this. Like he might be struck down by some divine force and crumble into ash the minute he left the car.

Johnny clearly didn't think the same, clapping Ghost heartily on the shoulder.

" 'mon then."

Ghost stalled for a moment. He felt the ridiculousness of the whole situation fully for the first time since they'd left Hereford, and now a thin tendril of cowardice was working its way up his throat. He tried to scrounge up some explanation, some excuse to backtrack, but came up blank.

"She won't bite yer head of," Johnny chuckled.

Ghost glanced out of the window as Soap spoke and watched whoever this *she* was move into the courtyard. Tension curled in his gut— he was out of time for excuses.

Johnny ducked out of the car with a boyish grin.

"There she is — Gwinnie, a chridhe!"

The figure— Gwinnie, apparently— advanced on them at the same time as Ghost slammed his side of the car door. She stopped in front of them, her hands on her hips, haloed by the evening light, like a small wellie-clad celestial omen in the yard.

Soap reached her first, scooping her up into a bone-crushing hug. "How are ye, love?"

Ghost's stomach flipped at the sight, a sensation that caught him off guard. The ease of it all was lost on him. When was the last time he'd seen such open affection? When was the last time he'd *felt* it?

The answer was right there, bubbling up from beneath his twisted insides. *Never*.

He stopped a few feet short of them and waited, willing himself to stay settled. It didn't matter. It shouldn't matter.

"Right." Johnny rocked on his heels, turning back to Ghost. "So this here is Gwin."

Ghost looked properly at the woman Soap gestured to for the first time, taking in rough, raw hands, tousled hair and mud-caked coveralls. She was not a tall woman, but Ghost recognised the strength she carried in her frame by the way she stood. In some small way, it almost reminded him of Johnny, that toothy confidence that rippled through a body built for purpose.

The woman shook her head at Johnny and turned to face him. "That'd be Gwen, actually. John here's the only one still clingin' to that stupid nickname."

Ghost couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he simply nodded.

"Oi, nothin' wrong with a good nickname," Johnny laughed, looking between the two of them. "Gwin, this here's my mate from the forces — they call him Ghost."

Gwen's eyebrows reached for her hairline.

"Right, so they do. An' what do us normal folk call ye?"

"Gwin—" Johnny began.

"Simon," Ghost interjected. "It's Simon."

Johnny glanced at him, skepticism written all over his face. Rightfully so— Ghost himself was left scrambling to justify this decision in his own mind. No one called him Simon except Price, and even that had required a monumental shift of perspective in Ghost's mind. This was different. It was a subconscious need to prove that he could be the

kind of person Gwen described, well-adjusted enough to exist in his own space, as his own person, not hidden behind layers of secrecy and omission.

It was also, partly, his thrumming need to be accepted by someone close to Soap, which was an instinct he believed he had well and truly squashed until Johnny himself had pushed his way into Ghost's life and declared them *friends*.

Gwen smiled. "Now tha's more like it. Good to meet you, Simon."

She looked as though she wanted to stick her hand out, evaluated the situation, and thought better of it. Instead, she gave him a sharp nod that mirrored his own.

Then, without warning, she turned and began to walk across the yard, gesturing for Ghost and Soap to follow her.

"Right, let's get ye lads settled."

Johnny moved first, although he turned to look at Ghost as he walked, a sliver of apprehension still visible in his eyes.

"Is that okay— her calling you Simon?" he asked, low enough not to be overheard.

Ghost tried to ignore how his stomach swooped at the way his name sounded coming from Johnny's mouth.

"S'fine," he replied brusquely.

Johnny's eyes lingered a second too long. Then he nodded, something unreadable in his face, and followed Gwen across the yard.

—

Gwen led them through a wooden gate at the far end of the yard, beyond the cottages, down a dirt-caked, trampled path.

"I'll give ye the tour," she said.

A field opened up to the left, and Ghost caught his first glimpse of a handful of Gwen's flock. A dozen sheep or so lay like lumps of white cotton between the stones and vegetation, their jaws working in steady circles around mouthfuls of grass.

To the right was another row of crumbling stone structures, hidden

from the view of the yard. Each had a stable door, labelled with a large number that had been sprayed onto the moss-covered wood. Johnny peered into one of them as they walked, unlatching the upper part of the door and leaning into the dark of the interior. Ghost could smell the damp air that came from within as he watched Johnny crane his neck further inside, cataloguing the easy joy that radiated from him and storing it somewhere deep in his mind.

“Nothin’ in there?” Johnny asked. He re-emerged and caught up with Ghost’s stride.

Gwen glanced over her shoulder at them. “Not yet, laddie. There’s been none lambin’ yet an’ the empty hoggets are all out in the field.”

Johnny nodded thoughtfully, as if any part of what Gwen had said made sense to him.

Ghost caught Gwen’s eye and looked away, instead choosing to pull Johnny into his space by the wrist and grumble “Fuck’s a hogget?” into his ear.

Johnny snickered. “One of them wee lads in the Lord of the Rings.”

Ghost released the grip on his wrist. “Absolute git.”

Ahead of them, Gwen huffed a laugh. “I can hear ya, twits. Simon, a hogget’s a young sheep, like those ladies out in tha’ field on yer left. Empty jus’ means they’ve no’ gotten pregnant.”

Ghost nodded dumbly, following Gwen’s gesture towards the field. If he looked beyond the scattering of sheep— *hoggets*, whatever that distinction meant— he could see mountains rising in the middle distance, the ground swelling with large stones and breaking away into craggy peaks.

He stopped for a moment, imagining the view from one of those stony mountaintops. How small, it must make you feel, to see all this wilderness laid out beneath you. How quiet it must make your mind.

“Admirin’ Bidean Nam Bian?” Soap asked, still at his shoulder.

“That some kind of incantation?”

“Pish aff, ya weapon, you’re in our territory now. That’s what the mountains back there are called. Gwin took me ‘round ‘em when I came here last time.”

“Mm.”

“Fuckin’ beautiful up there, I tell ye. We’ll go someday, eh? If the weather holds.”

Ghost cursed Johnny’s damn easy smile, the relentless way he kept inviting himself into Ghost’s thoughts.

“Sure. If the weather holds.”

They kept walking.

Ahead of them, the barn loomed, a watercolour painting in a child’s storybook with its red tin roof and peeling green-painted cladding. Tendrils of ivy knotted themselves between the boards, extending long, curling fingers over the entrance.

Gwen leaned against the side of the open gate, hands in the pockets of her waterproofs, watching their approach.

“Ye know, John, ye neglected to mention that yer friend here was part giant. Like a fuckin’ shire horse, I tell ye.”

Johnny cackled.

“Aren’t you lucky he’s at your disposal?”

“Indeed I am. I’ll put ye both to work, dinna fash.”

“Bit bloody presumptive,” Ghost grunted, but he followed Gwen into the barn anyway.

It was bigger and warmer inside than Ghost had expected. Two enormous pens bracketed one wall, straw-lined and filled with sleeping sheep.

“These are all my lasses,” Gwen said, turning to them with a fond smile on her face. “Twins in tha’ pen,” she pointed to the far side. “An’ singles in this one. It’s fairly quiet in here at the moment ‘cause they’ve all been fed, but the sound’ll wreck yer heid in the morning. Hope yer early risers.”

Johnny and Ghost exchanged a look. Ghost wondered how the sounds of a farmyard would compare volume-wise to the artillery fire of a battlefield.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” he said, wry.

“Right,” Gwen said. She had the grace not to push the point. “As of today, there’s been nothin’ happening, but this time two weeks from now, we’re lookin’ at near’ three hundred lambs from these ladies.”

Johnny whistled. “Good numbers.”

“By yer expert standard, aye? Simon, I’ve wrangled John ta help me before, so I reckon he’ll give ye the run-down as we git gaun.”

“Don’t I know it,” Ghost grunted. His ego was taking hit after hit today—he didn’t like being the one to know the least about this whole affair, especially not with the staggering overconfidence currently radiating from the man on his right.

At the very least, there were less people and more animals to catalogue his humiliation, and most of them seemed to be asleep.

“Well. S’pose that’s it fer now.” Gwen clapped her hands together. “Glad to have you boys around.”

—

She left them at the doorstep of the smaller limestone cottage.

“My gaff’s the one across the yard. Call us if ye need anythin’.”

“Sure,” Johnny said. A nod in her direction. “Thanks, Gwinnie.”

They were alone then. It was an unsteady sensation, to be here. Shielded from the life he’d been accustomed to by thick whitewashed walls draped with ivy, by mountaintops that obstinately watched him scramble with the change.

“She’s some craic, eh?”

And then there was that. Him. Johnny, framed in ten thousand different lights, grinning at him from the backdrop of a life Ghost had never even considered for him.

“How d’you two know each other?”

The question came out as more of an order than anything else.

Johnny blinked, unfazed. “Gwin and I? Ah.. schoolmates, I s’pose. Used ta kick about with her after school, she lived right close to me.”

“You grew up around here?”

“Well not here, no. We both used’a live in town. ‘Bout forty minutes back south. This whole thing-” Johnny gestured vaguely to the yard. “S’got nothing to do wi’ me. Gwinnie’s granda’ left it to her, I think. I just... come here for the scenery, I guess. The quiet, ya know?”

There was a brittleness to his words, the spaces of omission between sentences that whispered *don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask*.

And Ghost didn’t. How could he? He’d sooner be flayed alive than have someone poke holes in the vague snatches of truth he was occasionally forced to present to the world, so he sure as hell wouldn’t be the one to do that to Soap.

He grunted a vague noise of acknowledgment that Johnny seemed to appreciate, and then followed him inside.

The cottage was warm and smelled of something earthy. In the kitchen, Ghost leaned against the doorframe, surveying flagstone tiles and lumpy old crockery entombed in peeling sideboards. A quick clock of the exit points did very little to quiet his mind, although he wasn’t sure how much use they’d be anyway. Maybe if a rogue sheep came blasting in the door.

It was nice, he supposed, as far as kitchens went. Rustic, or something. He didn’t typically have the headspace to think about other words to describe the space, but the heavy, mis-matched wooden furniture and the thick rafters that bracketed the ceiling did lend some kind of charm to it all. Not that it mattered. He doubted he would have felt less out of place in Buckingham palace, or perhaps those godawful offices in Edinburgh. It was such a familiar sensation inside him, like a quiet sin, to encroach on a space that had clearly never been meant for him.

Soap stuck his head into the fridge.

“Just a carton of milk,” he grumbled. “Gwinnie’s a real queen a’ hospitality.”

Ghost raised an eyebrow. “That better not have come out of one of her flock.”

Johnny spared him a scoff, swinging the fridge closed and moving onto the cupboards. “Oh, an’ a loaf a’ bread! Royalty, we are.”

“We’ve done worse.”

“Aye, yeah, in the fuckin’ wastes of Al-Mazrah desert, maybe, but I wager that we can do better than rationing a single bag a’ saltines between us for a week again.”

Ghost shuddered. “Pretty sure anything’s better than that.”

If he thought too hard, he could still taste the vague dry sandiness of their miserable rations at the back of his throat, speckles of salt burning the edges of his cracked lips. That had been a long week, even if Soap was exaggerating their dire nutritional situation. The heat of it lodged in his mind, it had been dry and stagnant and left him delirious, eating away at his better judgment. He remembered looking at Johnny’s knuckles for the first time, caught in a haze of feverish exhaustion, the way they’d cracked and split, abused by wind and sun. The way the same hands had tightened around his own wrist before their operation had begun, tugging him away with a wordless, almost desperate plea of *survive*.

“Ha!” Johnny gave a shout, suddenly triumphant.

The cupboard door closed with a thunk and he turned, brandishing a box of PG Tips at Ghost like it was a chest filled with gold.

Which, to be fair, it might as well have been.

“Fucking legend,” Ghost hummed, pushing away from the doorframe.

The kettle whistled sharply. Mugs clinked against each other. Johnny made a noise of pure disbelief as Ghost’s spoon returned to the bowl for a fourth heaping of sugar.

A soft silence settled between them.

Ghost lifted his mug and paused, thumb hooked around the edge of his mask.

Ah.

He faltered, suspended between choices.

Johnny leaned against the kitchen counter and stirred his tea, watching him.

“Want me to turn away?”

The nonchalance with which he asked the question hit Ghost right in the heart.

When had he started taking it for granted, this implicit understanding between them?

He thought about the way they operated in the field, the way they'd become bound together by their concessions of truth, feeding each other half-lies in the quiet gaps between firefights. Their don't-ask-don't-tell mentality had buffered the reality of those long nights, made the stretches of silence seem a little less tense, and without realising it, Ghost had almost become... comfortable.

He considered for barely a moment, swirling the golden-brown liquid in his cup around in slow circles.

"Nah."

The medical mask he'd been wearing came to rest to below his chin and Ghost took a sip of his tea. It was fine. He didn't have to pretend this meant something. It was nothing they hadn't done before—Johnny didn't even stare, just quirked his lip, cheeks dimpling, and looked out the window.

Ghost recalled the last time they'd been like this, face to face with one another, the memory of it floating to the surface of his cup.

It had been a bullet slitting the side of his cheek, leaving a stain of white-hot, furious pain in its wake. When they'd found each other after the fight, Johnny had looked at him with wide eyes, aghast. His hands had shaken as he'd pressed them to the bloom of blood that dripped down the side of Ghost's face.

The mask had peeled away painfully, sticking to the corners of his wound. He remembered the way Johnny's grip had tightened around the blood-stained fabric in his hands.

"nother scar for the collection," Ghost had wheezed, running a hand over his face. "Watcha think?"

"Mm, I reckon yer modelling career's finished, anyway."

He'd laughed at that. "Nah, they're still captivating, I reckon."

Johnny had surveyed him then, eyes roving over the litany of scars, searching for an answer in the raised flesh.

Gauze soaked in iodine sunk its teeth into the wound and Johnny held his fingers there, pressing down gently. The intense look he'd had, a

crease forming between his eyes as he calculated the balance between the pressure of his fingers and the measure of pain he was drawing from the wound, equal parts awful and exhilarating, had stirred something inside Ghost that he'd beaten back into submission before it could properly take shape.

"Something like that." Johnny's voice had been barely more than a whisper, a cough into the air.

They'd let the silence stretch too long for it to make sense. The words had hung there, formless, and in the momentary lapse of understanding, Soap had looked as though he wanted to snatch them and stuff them back into his mouth.

A trail of iodine had dripped down Ghost's face and he'd let Johnny swipe it away.

He traced a finger over the scar now. It had healed well, barely more than a pencil-thin streak of silvery skin, a phantom on his cheekbone. It still caught him off guard, every time, how much easier the wounds seemed to heal when they'd been cleaned.

Johnny cupped his mug in both hands and tipped his head back to catch the last drop of tea. With his clear expression, it was almost as if he shone, illuminating that darkening kitchen and exposing the recesses of Ghost's mind.

"Thanks for comin' here with me, Lt.," he said.

Ghost could have said a thousand different things in response. Words, like small pinpricks of confession, bubbled up inside his chest, reaching the edge of his lungs before bursting into nothingness. He'd never been good at being honest.

But he tried for it anyway.

"Glad to be here, Johnny."

Outside, the sun slipped below the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

Specifically, a hogget is a ewe between one and two years old that probably hasn't had a lamb before. Nitty gritty and all that.

My boss would roast me *so hard* if he knew this is what i was

using my farm knowledge for. Anyway: enjoy these boys getting a well deserved break, and learning some things about sheep, maybe.

I have the bones of this fic written so I'm hoping by posting this it will motivate me to finish the rest of it-- please let me know what you think!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

hoo boy i am sorry for the delay-- i had a bit of a kill-your-darlings moment with this chapter and had to do some reworking that i couldn't start for a While... anyway, hope you enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was past midnight and Soap was shaking him awake and for a long, bizarre moment, Ghost believed they were back in the field.

“Johnny,” he rasped, voice thick with sleep and confusion. “What the fuck?”

He gazed up at Johnny, who was kneeling against the edge of his mattress. Moonlight glazed the side of his face, softening the lines of his brow bone, the sharp slant of his nose, his lips. Ghost expected to see urgency, concern, or at the very least, some shame flitting across his features, but he found none of it. Johnny looked *ecstatic*.

“‘m sorry for waking you, Lt.,” he conceded, voice low. “Shite, really sorry. But... erm, you should come on,”

“S'alright,” Ghost grunted, mellowing out. He tried to conceal the truth with his voice, that if Johnny had been anyone else, there was a very good chance they'd have a knife sticking in their gut by now.

Then, he processed the rest of Johnny's words, feeling a familiar icy dread filling his veins.

“Has something happened?”

He was already standing, forcing Soap upright from his spot on the side of the bed. Johnny looked up at him, standing a hair's breadth too close, mouth parted in wordless alarm at the sudden movement. There was a beat of silence, punctuated only by the sound of their breathing.

“No, no, nothing's wrong,” Johnny said eventually. His voice was soft and strange, somehow warped when they were this close. It stirred something feeble and affectionate in Ghost's chest.

“It's just— the first lamb is coming.”

Ghost stared at him. "You..what?"

Johnny gave him a devastating smile.

"Come on, come with me. You'll like this. "

I wonder if you know, Ghost thought, the lengths I would go to, for you never to look at anyone else like that again.

He followed Johnny out of the farmhouse, into the blackness of the night, without a second thought.

—

The barn was heady with the smell of *life* as they walked in. Warm, moist air hit them, heavy with the stink of animals, muck and something deeper, more visceral. Above them, light poured gently from a naked bulb hanging from the rafters, casting the space with a dreamlike, hazy glow.

Gwen was already there, her coveralls on. She leaned her forearms against the gate of the furthest pen from the door, gaze focused on her animals.

"Alright, Gwinnie?" Soap called from the doorway.

She looked up, then looked again.

"Christ on a bike, you actually woke him up. How's it, Simon?"

Ghost gave a nod of acknowledgement, the implication that the two of them had discussed his presence worming its way into his lungs.

"Course I did," Johnny grinned, placing a warm hand on the back of Ghost's arm. "He's got to see it."

The simplicity of Johnny's movement would have rooted him to the spot if it weren't for the gentle tug that followed, leading him forward to the front of the pen. Gwen shifted to make space for the two of them then tipped her head to the far left corner, just underneath the boarded wall. "Just there. See the way she's kickin'? Tha' means she's in labour, poor wee one. She'll go down soon, and then we'll hop in."

Ghost followed her gaze apprehensively. "Into the pen?"

"Aye, aye. She should be able to lamb by herself, but we'll hafta make sure she's alright," Gwen explained.

“Scared of a few sheep, Ghost?” Soap added teasingly.

Ghost glanced at Soap and found his eyes already trained on him, wordless mirth creasing them around the edges.

“Sure am, Johnny,” he said dryly.

He would have been more irritated if he wasn’t more focused on the fact that the length of Johnny’s body was pressed against his from shoulder to thigh as the two of them crowded the gate. Warmth leached from one body to the next, leaving only a very small space of Ghost’s mind unoccupied enough to watch the animals in front of him. A part of him felt that Johnny must be doing it on purpose. That he knew, somehow, despite the agonising efforts Ghost went to to conceal it, that he had the uncanny ability to *get to him*. Whether it was physical or not, it didn’t matter.

It should have been infuriating, the fact that Johnny had achieved, through no fault nor will of his own, the one thing Ghost himself couldn’t bring himself to do— ground him, bring him back from the brink of whatever precipice he had resigned himself to live on.

But it wasn’t. It was a handhold Ghost clung to with the desperation of a man drowning.

“There she goes,” Johnny whispered into the air, a touch of reverence lacing his tone as he watched the ewe lower itself to the ground. Ghost didn’t bother looking away, meeting the weightless gaze Soap gave him head on.

“Right,” Gwen said from beside them. “C’mon in, lads.”

Ghost tensed for a moment as he watched Gwen sling one leg over the gate and clamber over, landing gracefully on the straw-bed of the pen. Soap grinned and vaulted after her, his footfalls a little heavier as he landed.

He held a hand out to Ghost. “Yer turn, big lad.”

Ghost rolled his eyes and laid one heavy hand in Johnny’s, slinging himself over the gate.

“Quietly, now,” Gwen said, gesturing the both of them over to the corner of the pen. “Don’t wanna spook her, but c’mere, she’s progressin’.”

Johnny turned to her, grinning, and pulled out of Ghost's grip. Ghost missed the weight of his roughened palm almost immediately, his hand closing around empty air.

He wasn't wearing his gloves— hadn't since Hereford. He hadn't even thought about them, until now.

Skin against skin was rare in Ghost's life. Usually, the feel of warmth, so vulnerable and direct against his own flesh, made him want to slough his skin off and crumple into a boneless heap. Thankfully, his usual demeanour seemed to convey his aversion pretty well to the majority of the people he spent his time with.

Key word being: majority.

Johnny was relentless with his touch. There was being tactile, and there was *Johnny* being tactile— always blindsiding him, a hand pressed to Ghost's back in passing greeting, head resting against his shoulder in the aftermath of a fight, a cheerful punch to the arm in a fit of laughter, the snag of a body pressing up against him, *holding* him, hands dragging invisible lines of fire across his skin-

"Ghost!"

Johnny's whisper-shout dipped into his thoughts, almost comical in his attempt to be quiet. Ghost glanced to him, shook the thoughts out of his head and wiped all sensation of them from his fingertips. *Get it together, Riley.*

"Come and see," Johnny urged, gesturing frantically.

For a moment, Ghost hesitated, thinking about the whole...process of what was happening.

"Not too sure I want to see that, Johnny."

"Don't be daft," Johnny said, shaking his head. Then, as Ghost stayed frozen, he huffed, "you've seen worse."

Something sharp curled its claws into Ghost's gut.

Because that was just it, wasn't it? The parameter Ghost lived his life by. Everything was survivable, because rest assured, he'd had it worse. Every scrape and cut in the field had a bullet-hole eclipsing it, every sleepless night had a lifetime of nightmares to live up to. Even this—the all-consuming hunger that flared inside of him when Johnny's

eyes met his— was easy, because god, he'd learned to starve before.

He packed that string of thoughts away into a dimly lit corner of his mind, forcing himself back into the present moment, and moved through the pen. Just as he joined Johnny against the far wall, the ewe gave a low cry, and Gwen gasped.

"It's oot," she laughed, hands raised in startled joy. "First lamb of the season."

Dropping to her knees beside the animal, Ghost watched as she brushed straw and wetness from the face of a tiny, shivering lamb. She turned, then, eyes finding Ghost's, and waved him over. Johnny placed a hand on the small of his back and eased him forward, making the decision for him before Ghost had a chance to flee.

Shooting him a quick glance, Ghost let Johnny's touch bring him gently to the ground, easing down to his knees by Gwen's side, right in front of the lamb.

It was... *cute*.

The lamb, a little alien creature, staggered to its feet. Head roving, its legs wracked with tremors, it only made it about two seconds upright before it began to topple. Ghost instinctively braced one hand on either side of the animal, steadying it. It was so warm, beneath his fingers. He didn't know something so small could ever feel so real, indisputably alive to him.

"She'll be aw'right, Simon," Gwen whispered.

She. The lamb was a she.

"Let her find her mammy."

Ghost leaned back against his heels and watched the lamb try again, pushing its—*her*— weight onto her front limbs, resolutely shouldering her centre of gravity and stumbling towards the ewe.

"God." Johnny's frameless prayer hit them all. "*Beautiful.*"

Slowly, the ewe leaned her head down, snuffling the tiny creature, cleaning the dirt from her face with an impossible gentleness. In the low-light of the early morning, Ghost could barely make out its features, but he liked to imagine the ewe's eyes were closed, breathing in the scent of something she loved so deeply without ever even

having known it.

The lamb took a shuddering breath and bleated. A soft sound, barely a cry, but it cut deep into Ghost's chest.

Later, in the half-light of the kitchen, he replayed the sound in his mind. He stared down at his hands on the kitchen table, the echoes of it bouncing around inside him, working its way into the deepest parts of his heart.

He had more scars than he'd remembered. *When had he stopped counting them?*

The watery moonlight that cast through the window was shadowed momentarily by a presence at his shoulder, and then another hand joined his on the table, fingertips resting just a hair's breadth from the edge of Ghost's wrist.

Ghost didn't move, just watched. Tentatively, Johnny's pinkie brushed the side of his hand, sending a quick jolt of electricity through his veins. There and then gone, in the blink of an eye. Almost as if it had never happened in the first place.

Ghost looked up at him. Johnny's expression was soft and complicated.

A cup was placed in front of him, more tea, the steam rising and curling into intangible shapes in the moonlight, replacing the ghosted touch of skin with the smooth surface of warm china, and Johnny sat down across from him.

He said nothing, just fixed him under a heavy, weighted gaze.

Ghost liked silence. It was a rare thing, almost impossible in his day-to-day, so he bathed in it now. Watching Johnny's profile, seeing the way his chest rose and fell with every breath...

It was pathetic, how entangled he was in the way Johnny lived. He wanted to take him apart like a rifle, dismantle every bone and catalogue the way they fit together inside him, to understand the connections inside him that tugged and twisted and turned to make him move, make him think, make him see the world the way he did.

Across from him, Johnny made a thoughtful noise, fingers tapping the

base of his mug.

“First time I was ever on leave, I came here, y’know?”

Ghost blinked, drawn from his haze of thought. *No, he hadn’t known.*

Johnny avoided his searching gaze, instead focusing on the beam of moonlight that hit the table.

“I was about nineteen maybe, at tha’ point. And I was pretty damn lost. Gotten so used to my orders, that not having them, I didn’t really know where to go. Kinda... jus’ turned up here, outta the blue. And lucky me, it was around this time of year. So Gwin, she took charge of me like my fuckin’ CO, I swear— gave me jobs ta do on the farm, kept my head busy...and she brought me to see the first lambing. Just like tonight.”

He paused to sip his tea, finally catching Ghost’s eyes over the rim of his cup.

When he continued, his voice was soft, like it had been punctured by something sharp.

“When I saw tha’ little thing... I cried, Ghost. Pure bawlin’ in the middle of the pen. Gwinnie musta thought I’d gone spare— but I just couldn’t stop. Lookin’ at the little creature and her mam like that... it all kinda hit me at once, I guess.”

He trailed off.

Questions roiled inside Ghost’s stomach, shifting back and forth without direction.

Ghost’s principle of *not asking* wavered inside him. Typically, it was instinctual— to ask for information meant to offer something in return, and that was an exchange for which he had no currency.

Johnny, though...

Johnny handed him honesty in small doses, vignettes of his life beyond the boundaries of privacy, always tactful and carefully placed — and never with any demand of return.

It didn’t matter, though. He had a way of eking the truth from Ghost without ever really needing to ask.

Ghost swallowed a sip of tea and the rest of his reservation, then

asked,

“What...what hit you?”

There was a long pause before Johnny spoke.

“Loss, I guess.”

Wood scraped against stone and Johnny stood, already deflecting the flicker of pain that had settled into his features for one brief moment. With one hand, he collected both of their empty mugs, then paused, looking down at Ghost with an expression he had never seen before.

“You... made it easier for me to come back here, y’know.”

There it was, another sliver of honesty placed in Ghost’s palm without any expectation of repayment. Ghost had no idea what to do with it, so he tucked it away with the rest of Johnny’s things, into the impression of him that he’d made in Ghost’s mind.

“Get some sleep, L.t.”

And then he was gone.

—

Night washed away into morning, and Ghost was nursing a piece of toast in the comfortable silence of the early light when Johnny barged into the kitchen and jingled his keys at him.

“Fancy a spin?”

Ghost raised his head from the contents of his plate, lifting his eyebrows wearily. It wasn’t exactly how he’d imagined their first greeting after the night before. Their conversation in that very same kitchen still sat heavily inside his mind, putting pressure on his spine.

There was something comforting about it, though, Johnny’s perpetual nonchalance. His incessant urge to move on. Ghost considered that maybe he was living vicariously through him— that if he sat close enough, Johnny’s ability to roll with the punches might rub off on him.

As it stood, Ghost did not roll with any punches. He took his hits squarely to the jaw and let the back of his head split open on cold concrete as he hit the ground. He let his memories calcify like stones, the weight of *before* pinning him down.

Maybe that was why he'd come here in the first place. To test himself, see how far he could drag his grudges away from the battlefield before the weight of them got too much and Johnny was inevitably left to watch him collapse.

He watched Johnny now, busying himself around the kitchen, setting the kettle on, stealing the knife from Ghost's plate to butter a slice of toast, leaning against the table's edge and pulling on a pair of shoes, some throwaway gripe about the old mattress he'd slept on leaving his lips.

Ghost felt the way the energy Johnny cast into the room shifted through the air, sparking at his skin.

Maybe he'd feel it, when he couldn't carry his grudges with him any longer. Maybe Johnny could warn him when his back was about to break.

"Where you goin'?" Ghost asked.

Johnny finished lacing his boots, straightening and stretching his arms above his head with a groan.

"Going t'get the messages down at the village. Can't be eating toast fer every meal, surely."

He began to leave while he spoke. Voice rising, he made it to the far end of the hallway before pivoting and swinging his head back through the door, one hand braced against the doorframe. "Get a move on, soldier. You're coming too."

Ghost heaved a sigh and threw his crust down.

—

He managed to keep his complaining to a healthy minimum as he bundled himself into the passenger seat of Johnny's car. Secretly, he was pretty interested to see the village Soap mentioned, another scrap of the impossible mechanism that was John MacTavish presenting itself to him.

Johnny ducked his head and peered out of the windshield. "Blast it. Rain's on the way."

"You sound surprised. Thought Scotland was s'posed to rain all the time."

“It *does*, but... the village doesn’t have much gaun for it as is— looks pretty fuckin’ miserable in the rain.”

Ghost glanced at him. “Were you try’n to impress me, MacTavish?”

“Haud yer wheest.”

Johnny started the car, leaning his arm against Ghost’s headrest as he reversed out of Gwen’s driveway, muscles in his neck flexing with the turn of his head, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. His arm tensed against the leather then slipped away, finding the gearstick again.

Well. Consider *that* an image resolutely filed away for storage in Ghost’s psyche.

They didn’t speak for a while. Ghost watched Johnny as he drove, taking in the tension in his jaw, the way he bit the inside of his lip as he followed the road down the mountain.

“Got somethin’ on my face, Lt.?”

Ghost eyes snapped away as if they’d been magnetised. “Fuckin’ hell,” he mumbled.

Johnny laughed a little, glancing over at him. “You seemed to like the lambin’, last night.”

Bless him, MacTavish and his *moving-swiftly-on* gene.

“S’pose so,” Ghost admitted. “Never seen anything like it before.”

“Aye, not many have. Really does somethin’ to you, eh? New perspective and all that. As long as ye didnae start howlin’, I reckon ye did alright.”

Ghost inhaled a small laugh, deciding not to broach the conversation they’d shared in the early morning light. Instead, he thought of the feeling of the lamb beneath his fingers. Warm, slick with something visceral, and so, so fragile. He’d never imagined being so close to something like that. A new life, coughing and wriggling into existence, just...presented to him. Something that had *not* been there, and then was, just like that. Non-existence to existence in the time it took to draw a single breath.

It went against every fibre of his being, unstitching the airtight fabric of his mentality.

He knew life was a one-way street. He'd been at the other end of it more times than he could count, so.. he thought he'd understood what it meant to be alive.

His chest had felt so weightless in that barn. Like he hadn't even been real.

Maybe, he'd never understood a damn thing about life at all.

—

The rain started to fall a short while later, the clouds having politely waited until the two of them crested the hill into the village before starting their downpour. Ghost doubted it would have made much of a difference even the weather had been different— the village seemed completely static in its over-all, washed-out greyness. Soap wrinkled his nose as he pulled into drab carpark.

"Weird ta be back," he mumbled. The words were directionless, said more to the empty air than to Ghost.

Johnny wasted no time pulling open his car door. When Ghost hesitated, peering out of the rearview mirror towards the grim high-street, he clucked his tongue. "'mon, you. Time for sightseeing later."

Ghost noted down 'you' as one of the less amicable ways Johnny had chosen to address him by and heaved himself out of the car.

Fluorescent lights buzzed in tune with tinny radio music inside the shop. It had by far the most colour of anything Ghost had seen in the village so far, with faded posters in the windows advertising long-passed sales, their corners tattered and peeling up, betraying their age. Inside, the shelves twinkled with garishly bright plastic-packaged goods. Johnny scanned the aisles, idly tracing a finger along the edge of a shelf as the two of them browsed.

After a moment, they came to a halt in front of a display of frozen goods and Johnny sighed deeply. "Really hope I don't run into anyone I know here."

"You got many acquaintances who 'ang around the frozen fish fillets?"

He scoffed. "Got a couple, yeah. But what I mean is...everyone in this town knows everyone. Don't need my presence to be the parish gossip for the next week, jus' cause Beatrice Hove spotted me buyin' frozen lasagne on the way to pickin' up her pension, ta be honest."

The inside of the freezer cabinet smelled like airplane fuel when Johnny pulled the door open, but Ghost accepted several cheerfully-coloured boxes from Johnny nonetheless, managing to school his grimace.

“We’ll be in and out,” he reassured.

Johnny scratched the nape of his neck, a soft, knowing smile on his lips. “What we do best, Lt.”

True to his callsign, Johnny worked his way through the rest of their shopping list with expert efficiency, gathering an armful of groceries in, presumably, record time.

They stopped again in front of an aisle filled with canned goods and glass jars.

Ghost dug his hands into his pockets, eyeing the armful of things Johnny had collected. “What the fuck d’you need flour for?”

Johnny quirked his eyebrows and offloaded his bounty onto Ghost. “You’ll see.”

He squatted to reach the bottom shelf, ignoring Ghost’s huff of protest, squinting at the yellow stickers underneath each item. “Two twenty for one jar of sauce? Country’s gone ta the fuckin’ dogs, I tell ye. You Brits and yer meddling.”

As Johnny spoke, Ghost’s eyes traced the chain of his dog-tags, noting the way the glinting metal sloped over the back of his neck. He wanted to put the chain between his teeth and *tug*, to see which gave way first— him, or them.

His mouth said, “Sorry for any personal offence.”

“Oh, aye. You’re the worst of the lot of ‘em, L.t., infiltrating the homeland.”

“*You* invited me, prick.”

Soap straightened, rocking on his heels once. “Let’s no’ get caught up in details. C’mon, ye Sassenach.”

The cashier looked suitably afraid of them as Soap paid for their groceries. It was a little refreshing, a reminder that despite the lack of sincerity of pretty much anything that had been happening in Ghost’s

life within the past few days, he hadn't lost the edge of his appearance.

The feeling was dampened only slightly by Soap pointing out a row of children's face masks, complete with peace signs and cartoon hearts near the exit, a quip of "nother for the collection?" leaving his lips.

Outside, the village was quiet, the recent fall of rain presumably chasing any potential locals back into their houses. The two of them walked in step through the empty village, Johnny fumbling with his shopping bags, Ghost taking in his surroundings. Rows of slate-grey houses bracketed the high street, interspersed with local shops— or empty shells of them, shutters drawn and signs faded.

"Ah, lookit that," Johnny said, stopping suddenly. He pointed to another hulking grey structure, pebble-dashed and dishevelled, on the other side of a small carpark.

Ghost frowned. "What am I lookin' at?"

"The best place in town— that's where the magic happened. My aul' footy club."

It was true— behind the old building, Ghost could see a pitch, stretching miserably towards the hills, bogged with rain.

"*That's* where you played?"

Soap made an affronted noise. "Yes, thank you very much. I'll have you know we made it to finals a good few times, an' won some of 'em too."

"Mm. I'm sure that pitch fostered some great talent."

Soap sighed. "Humble beginnings, L.t."

"*Very* humble."

There was a wistfulness to Johnny's expression that Ghost hadn't seen before.

"Aye. Still. I had some good fun there."

"You miss it?"

Johnny shook his head, his eyes clouding over. "Ach. No. Moved on."

They turned off the main street, leaving the last semblance of a lively community behind in favour of a deserted side road.

Ghost stayed a half-step behind Johnny. “Where you takin’ me, MacTavish?”

They came to a halt by the only shop on the street that had any indication of being open. The dusty blinds in its windows were half-drawn, lazily overlooking the rest of the village. The peeling sign that hung from the awning read *‘hunting - fishing - outdoors’*.

“In here, lad. Gwin asked me to pick up some bits for the farm.” Johnny said, peering in the murky window. “Won’t be a mo’.”

He disappeared into the dark, dusty maw of the shop before Ghost could question anything further.

As he waited, the clouds began to dissolve and thin, watery beams of light started to break through. Ghost ducked out from underneath the awning, peering back up the hill the village lay on, now bathed in a marginally lighter shade of grey.

It felt strangely unreal to be here, in the place where Johnny had grown up— he felt a sort of disconnect with the logic of it. Trying to visualise a younger version of Johnny, roaming the same sloping streets in his youth that they both now traipsed through in the rain, he found himself coming up blank. He couldn’t imagine the man that *he* knew living a life here. Johnny was far too alive for a place like this.

Maybe he had been different, before. He must have been. The thought of it made something in Ghost’s chest curl tight.

Johnny reappeared after several minutes, giving Ghost a small nod as he joined him by his side.

“Ah, it’s still the same,” he mused. “Nothin’ in this town changes.”

As he spoke, he tipped his head up to the shop’s sign, pausing for a moment. Then, “used to come here with my Da.”

The tone of his voice, soft and see-through, slithered its way down Ghost’s spine.

“He used to love a bit’a huntin’,” Johnny continued, eyes faraway. “Used to drag me along, too, when I was still a wain. God, I’ve still got the knife he gave me, would’ya believe?”

There was a film of tension over the words he spoke, a familiar kind of tautness ringing the words— the kind that would cause deadly recoil if pushed too far.

Ghost didn't offer an answer. He knew the tone and its meaning too well. It was almost strange, hearing it mirrored back to him instead of slipping out of his own mouth.

"Well." Soap wound his voice into submission again. "Was alright, I s'pose. I was too good of a shot though, it got boring."

"Picture o' grace and modesty, you are."

Soap hummed, sequestering one of his shopping bags to his hip to roll out tension in his shoulder. "Ever done any yourself?"

Had he?

Ghost remembered the feeling of a knife pressed into his palm, time and time again, the way every time the hilt had felt like more of a threat than the blade.

Go on, son. He could still hear it in his mind, that voice that grew on his insides like a mould he could never scrape away. *Do it quick, go on. You're not fuckin' scared of it, are you?*

He wondered where the definition of hunting ended. Where the distinction between *prey* and *victim* blurred. Did it count as killing, if the prey was pushed onto the blade? Or was it just cowardice, laid bare, the inaction of something too weak to push back? He thought of the strength he could put behind one of his own blades, all vestiges of that same weakness thrown aside— or at least, buried far from the light of day.

It was funny, the way the brain compartmentalised.

"No," he said.

Soap shrugged, recognising the distinct shut-down of that line of communication.

"Fair. Let's get these prizes home then, eh?"

—

Gwen was in the yard when they returned, wrestling with a large section of fencing under each arm. Spotting them, she surrendered her

battle and waved them over.

“Just in time, lads. Gi’es a hand, yeah?”

When she looked up at them, Ghost noticed the tiredness that had smeared dark circles beneath her eyes.

Johnny gave Ghost a smack on the arm and a sly grin. “Go on, shire horse. I’ll bring the groceries in.”

He bounded away, leaving Ghost without a chance to argue.

Gwen shook her head as she watched him go. “Tha’ boy. Dunno how ye keep him in line.”

She pushed a section of the fencing towards Ghost, clamping the other section firmly underneath both arms, and headed down the dirt-trampled path behind the cottages.

There was something refreshing about her lack-of-frills attitude—Ghost could understand why she and Johnny had remained close. Johnny always seemed to need someone to tether to, to keep him from floating away into the stratosphere. And, further than that, to keep him from being shot down, burning up on his way back down to Earth.

Rusty hinges screeched as Gwen swung the gate open, gesturing Ghost through into the barn. It seemed different in the daylight, smaller and less otherworldly.

Ghost cast a glance at the pens, searching for the lamb he’d seen last night. Behind him, Gwen rummaged through a box of supplies that balanced precariously on a stack of hay bales.

“Get much shuteye after last night?” she asked.

Ghost shrugged, a gesture she seemed to accept.

“If yer lookin’ for our wee friend, she’s in one of the stalls outside. We move the lambs with their mams out of the big pen to give em’ space.”

Nodding dumbly, Ghost dropped his section of fencing. “What’s this for?”

Gwen glanced over her shoulder. “Makin’ more single pens. Those aul stalls are gonna fill up fast, jus’ you watch. Yer peaceful holiday won’t stay peaceful much longer, once the lambs start comin’ proper.”

“Mm.”

This was a conversation that was out of Ghost’s depth, and he was floundering.

Thankfully, just then, Johnny’s voice rang out from the barn entrance.

“Havin’ fun without me?”

Gwen spared Johnny a quick glance from her box of supplies. “There you are, John. Village alright?”

“Ah, you know how it is,” Johnny sighed, coming to stand by Ghost’s side. Immediately Ghost felt the tension in his shoulders start to unwind, his senses grounding themselves once again.

Quietly, into his ear, Johnny asked, “solid?”

The low hum of his voice reverberated through Ghost. He nodded once, grappling with a distinct fizzing sensation in his chest.

Johnny’s eyes twinkled.

“Oi, Gwinnie. Got you yer toys.”

He tossed a spool of nylon twine and a packet of zip ties in Gwen’s direction. She caught them deftly, a grin tugging the corner of her lips as she turned to face them.

“Yer a star, John-boy.”

Tucking the items into the front pocket of her coveralls, Gwen nodded to the barn door. “Let’s give our little lass a visit, yeah?”

The ewe and her lamb had been sequestered to the furthest stall from the cottages. The stable door in front of them read “one” in a large spray-painted number, a harsh red line splitting the wood in two. There was a blotch at the base of the digit, where the can had been held too close to the wood, and a thin trail of red paint had slid down between the planks and dried like a bloodstain.

Each of the doors was similarly splattered, giving somewhat of a gory effect to them.

Each of them labelled with numbers, not names.

It all felt a little too familiar.

“G’wan in,” Gwen said, startling Ghost a little. She unbolted the door, splitting the one in half, then hung back, expectant. For a moment, the three of them looked at one another, unspeaking, as Ghost dithered. Finally, with a warm look from Johnny, he had no choice but to duck into the crumbling building.

The smell was *far* different to what Ghost had expected. It was more acrid than it had been the night before, a combination of livestock and something sour that made his stomach ache a little.

Behind him, Soap made a comical gagging noise. “Jesus. Think I’ll stay out here.”

Ghost caught his eye, head tipped over his shoulder. “Oh man up, soldier.”

Gwen chuckled, watching them both. Then, eyebrows raised, she added, “Yer mask might actually come in handy, Simon, wi’ the way it reeks in there. But you know, ye can take it off if ye like. I’m no’ that health conscious, honest.”

It was a light-hearted quip. Abjectly, Ghost could recognise that.

It didn’t stop the momentary panic that arced through him from freezing him to the spot, though.

He kept his eyes fixed on the far wall of the stall in front of him, unwilling to turn around to meet the gazes he felt on his back.

Johnny spoke first, voice cold and quiet. “*Gwin. Na abair.*”

The panic inside Ghost melted, sliding down the inside of his ribs and coming to settle in his stomach as an entirely new emotion.

Shame.

Johnny’s language shift had barely registered in his mind. Instead, Ghost was caught up in the *purpose* behind his words. Spoken with genuine urgency, the meaning held just out of his reach, but each syllable spoken *for* him, *about* him.

How feeble and transparent had he actually become, to allow Johnny to speak so honestly for him?

And how pitiful was he, that he found comfort in it?

There was a weighted pause. Ghost took in the lumpy plastered

surface of the wall, focusing on the details of it, willing the static in his mind to clear.

He wished he had the words to explain himself, to give a solid reasoning to his volatile dependence on his pathetic disguise. He wished he could tell them— and himself— why he needed it so much sometimes, why it meant nothing the next.

He wished he could look Johnny in the eyes and tell him, *I am okay with the way I am.*

But he couldn't. Not now, not ever.

Because that would require him to explain why the mask meant everything to him, except when Johnny was on the other side of it.

So he averted his gaze, feeling his stomach sink into the floor.

Gwen made an awkward harrumph. "Sorry. Stupid jokes."

Johnny inhaled sharply, stress rattling the edges of the sound. The noise of it kicked something inside Ghost into gear, and forcibly, he hauled his mind back into his body.

"Heard plenty worse from Johnny," he grumbled.

An olive branch. A silent message to Johnny.

I'm trying. You make me want to try.

A chuckle spilled into the cramped space of the stall, ringed with relief, and with a moment's hesitation, Johnny joined him. He smiled at Ghost, soft and understanding and far, far too kind.

The two of them leaned down, half-crouched over the shape of the ewe that lay nestled in the muddy straw.

"Where is she?" Soap whispered, voice soft in Ghost's ear.

It was hard to tell where one animal ended and the other began, but with a meticulous, sweeping gaze, Ghost caught sight of the little lamb. She was nestled in the crook of her mother's neck, her sleepy face nuzzled against the warmth of the ewe's coat of wool.

At the sight of her, a weight dropped into Ghost's chest, dense and cold and immovable. It was crushingly heavy, stealing the air from his lungs.

Ghost looked away, lightning fast, as if he'd been burned.

What was it that hurt so much for him to see?

He felt like a child again, a long-dead spectre of his own innocence, confronted for the first time with the most difficult question ever to be answered. *Where does it hurt? Why?* He'd been unequipped to deal with the question back then. He felt even more lost to the answer now.

He took a shuddering breath.

To his left, Johnny shifted. Ghost could feel the searching gaze he cast to the side of his face.

"You can touch her," Johnny whispered. "S'okay."

Ghost squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, frozen in his half-sit next to the sleeping ewe, feeling the sharp bite of that icy weight spreading into the pit of his stomach.

Then, eyes cracking open, with one shaking hand, he brushed the side of the lamb's face.

Something about the feeling inside him began to thaw.

Chapter End Notes

Rough translation for the teeny bit of scots gaelic would be something like "leave it" or "don't say." Basically, a soft way of John telling Gwen to shut up lmao.

(As an Irish speaker I'm trying desperately to extrapolate my knowledge into Scots Gaelic...it's not going well)

I'm on twitter now! Come yell at me: <https://twitter.com/flowersferns>

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

hey, just a heads-up, this chap is a bit heavier than the others.
please keep tags in mind.

specific cws not in tags: animal death, minor gore, reference to
inadvertent self-harm.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You speak Gaelic.”

Johnny looked up from the locker in the hallway, midway through
toeing his shoes off. “’Scuse me?”

A handful of days had already slid by, bleeding into one another,
giving Ghost a small degree of separation from the events of their first
full day on the farm. Time dropped by slowly— sticky and viscous and
coating his thoughts. It was a small salve on his raw emotions,
allowing him a chance to process.

Johnny joined him in the kitchen with his socked feet and wind-
tousled hair, fresh from the fields. A perfect picture of vulnerability.

He didn’t think there’d ever be enough time to process *that*. The
sickeningly complex sensation that crawled through him whenever his
mind lingered on Johnny for too long. It was a roiling mess inside
him, equal parts confession and denial. He’d never understand why
Johnny allowed him into his life like that— into the deepest parts of
his past, into the most intimate moments of his present.

He didn’t know what Johnny expected him to do with it. He doubted
the other man expected what he actually was doing with it, trying to
burn every image into his mind forever, using each new memory that
he formed to force an older, darker one into the back of his mind.

Before Price and his merciful red tape, the last psych eval he’d been
subjected to had contained the words “obsessive tendency” three
times in as many paragraphs.

It was probably better not to wonder what it might say now.

Beside him, Soap yawned, rolling out tension in his neck. Ghost

watched him, tasting his own heartbeat between his teeth.

“You speak Gaelic to Gwen.”

Johnny’s laugh reverberated from inside an open cupboard as the man started to rifle through their groceries. “*Hardly.*”

“I’ve heard it.”

“Ah.. well sure I can say my few words, nothin’ special, though.” Johnny pulled a haphazard handful of items from the cupboard, then straightened with a geriatric groan. “Why? Worried we’re givin’ out about ye?”

Ghost shrugged. “Nah.”

Then, after a moment of consideration, he added, “I...like it. Sounds nice.”

He hoped the words sounded more solid when spoken aloud than the way they’d felt in his mouth, soft and breakable. Honesty came so slowly to him, it almost felt like a threat.

Johnny’s mouth quirked into a tentative sort of smile.

If Ghost was a degree more delusional, he might have believed the tips of his ears were dusted faintly pink.

“Hogwash,” Soap said, quietly. His grin was brilliantly wide. It was worth the unsteadiness of the truth, to get to see it.

Then he turned his attention to the contents of the cupboard Johnny had emptied out onto the kitchen counter. A crumpled half-empty bag of sugar, a butter tin, their recently procured flour...

A frown pinched his brows together. “*What* are you doing?”

“What are *we* doing, ye mean.”

“Fuck are you on about?”

Johnny moved to another cupboard and pulled out a square metal tin, holding it out to Ghost’s chest with brazen look.

“*We* are making shortbread.”

Ghost nearly laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Nope. Deadly serious, Lt.,” Johnny said, rolling his sleeves up.

“You’re telling me you know how to bake? You’re taking the piss.”

In his mind, Ghost could still see the last time Soap had been left in charge of preparing a meal— the two of them huddled around a soggy little hexamine cooker somewhere along the coast of Croatia, Johnny keeping the faith with herculean effort despite the fact that the bottom of his ORP was leaking a considerable amount of beef stroganoff onto their only source of heat.

“It’s gonna be mint,” he’d said, strained through a laugh. *“Fine dining for ye, Lt.”*

Johnny shrugged now, the same crooked grin on his face as had been there back then. “Well. My track record’s not fantastic, typically, but these don’t come outta a plastic bag. Now, git yer apron on.”

—

Having acceded to all but the apron, Ghost found himself watching with a surprising fascination as Soap began to work his way through the recipe.

It was, ridiculously, almost like watching him in the field. He gave full attention to everything, that endearing earnestness with which he approached each task at hand, creasing his brows in concentration.

“Spoon,” he directed, holding a purposeful hand out to Ghost. *Nurse; scalpel.*

Ghost handed the wooden spoon over with a rough chuckle. “Yes sir.”

The spoon clattered to the counter between them, Johnny’s fingers fumbling a second too late. He made a choked-off noise as his hand scrabbled for it, eyes flicking the length of Ghost.

“...*what* did you just say?”

Ghost quirked his lip. “Nothing.”

A fantastically red flush crept up the base of Soap’s neck— no need for delusion this time. Ghost watched it spread— another vision to make a mental note of, for sure.

Shrugging around a distinct tugging sensation inside him, he offered, “you’re in charge here, Johnny.”

Johnny's mouth worked soundlessly as he shook his head. "...out of yer fuckin' mind," he managed to mumble, eyes trained firmly on his mixing bowl.

"Sure," Ghost replied, taking his space next to Johnny at the counter. "Well, on with it then. Show us how it's done."

—

The shortbread was *good*.

Lumpy, sure, a little cracked, but Ghost could forgive that. The sugar that had been sprinkled on top had crystallised in the oven, laving a swell of sweetness over his tongue when he took his first bite. The taste of it, simple and homely, burned into his mind. He hoped it would linger there for hours, that it might coat the words he spoke from then on, infusing them with the same feeling that shifted around inside him.

"You weren't so full of shit after all," he admitted, looking at Johnny.

"Aye, told ye to trust me," Soap said. "This is Scots heritage. Pretty sure it's in my DNA not ta fuck these up."

Ghost leaned against the closed oven door, feeling a small amount of warmth at his back, contented.

For him, cooking had always been done out of necessity— it was between it and starvation. He remembered that blurred period of his life, that *before* he could never fully let go, a time in which he was still too small to reach fully over the cooktop, but trying anyway, making the choice in an attempt to keep him— *him and...*— alive.

He'd never counted how many of his scars were burns. They all looked the same, eventually.

The conclusion was simple: cooking had been branded a hostile, begrudging necessity in his mind.

But this... was peaceful. It was new. It was something he could grow accustomed to.

—

The next morning came gently and Ghost stole out of the house before Johnny was awake, just as the light of the sunrise began to filter

through his curtains.

The room he'd been given was simple and small, nothing more than a bed and a dresser and, unfortunately, the oldest, creakiest floorboards he'd ever come across. But Ghost was trained and named with a specific purpose— he moved quietly across the floor, avoiding the loudest of the boards with practiced precision, and slipped down the hall into the mild morning breeze.

He breathed around a lungful of fresh air.

Uncaged.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so untethered. So free.

The cobblestones on the courtyard were still coated with a layer of morning damp, the small weeds that pushed their way resolutely between them brushing light, dew-covered fingers around his ankles as he walked. He tread lightly, savouring the way the sensation grounded him, and headed for the dirt path around the back of the cottages.

Bidean Nam Bian, with all of its jagged peaks, was still exactly where he'd left it in his mind, overlooking the field of sheep that were slowly beginning to wake in front of him.

He watched them for a while, focusing on the easy way they moved, completely unburdened, unbothered by anything at all. They were interesting creatures— they had a sort of antediluvian look about them, like their eyes contained a deep-rooted, ancient understanding of life that no other living being would be able to replicate.

Christ, when had he become so dramatic..

Movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention and Ghost turned away from the field. Down the track, by the far corner of the barn, a figure was moving back and forth, purposeful and efficient— Gwen, already busying herself around the farm. Ghost watched her, considering.

He had half a mind to return to the cottage, but curiosity drew him in.

At the moment, Gwen's back was turned. One hand rested on her hip, the other readjusting a knit cap over her ragged blonde curls as she watched water spill from the faucet at the side of the barn into a grimy plastic feed bucket.

Those same light footsteps carried Ghost down the dirt path until he was just level with her along the side of the barn, hovering at the corner.

Gwen whistled quietly as she waited. The water rushed loudly, almost obscuring the sound, a rhythmic kind of white-noise. Just as the bucket was about to spill over, she bent to pull it out of the stream and pushed another empty one into its place. Heaving the full bucket into both arms, she finally turned, straightening with a roll of her shoulders and lurching forward, right into Ghost's line of sight.

She started violently as she caught sight of him, her body freezing to a standstill in a split second. "Sweet sufferin' *Jesus*," she blurted out, eyes wide. The bucket in her hands sloshed dangerously, but to her credit, she held on fast. "*Fuckin' hell*, Simon."

Ghost nodded impassively towards her hands, clenched tight around the handle. "Need a hand with that?"

Gwen let the bucket sink to the ground, sighing long and loud. "I can see why John says yer called *Ghost*. Tha' was unbelievable, lad. Where'd ye come from?"

He shrugged. "Around."

A breathless laugh left her as Gwen steadied herself. "Right. Well, seein' as yer around, yeah, I could use an extra pair a' hands."

Ghost took the bucket from her, feeling the plastic handle bite into the palm of his hand. The weight of it, along with the pull in his muscles, was comforting—it stilled his mind, forced him to focus on the physical sensation of the moment. Gwen cut the tap again, heaving her own pitcher next to him. "Inside, into the troughs."

They worked together in silence, a sort of mutual understanding, making several trips back and forth between the pens and the tap outside.

The thought surfaced again in Ghost's mind, dangerously tantalising. *I could get used to this.*

Gwen turned to him as their next buckets filled, breaking their silent agreement.

"How long have you an' John been friends?"

Ghost blinked, taken aback by the sudden question. "That's- we're not—"

He stopped.

What were they, if not friends? Their relationship had drastically changed trajectory from subordinate-and-CO, a fact that made itself clearer to him every day they spent on the farm, away from the brass that breathed down their necks every day. Ghost's own.. complication of their relationship was irrelevant— the fact was, they shared a certain kind of trust that shouldn't have survived in their line of work.

Friends...

"Couple years," he concluded.

Gwin shook her head around a smile, eyebrows raised.
"Unbelievable."

Wariness snaked its way around Ghost's throat. "What?"

She tipped her head to the side, a stray curl escaping from beneath her hat. "Nothin', nothin'. Just... I'm surprised by you two, s'all."

Having done absolutely nothing to clarify her point, Gwen made to lift her pail, heading back towards the barn, but Ghost didn't step out of her way, looming over her. "*Surprised by us?* Fuck's that s'posed to mean?"

Water sluiced over the ground as Gwen replaced the bucket by her feet.

"I mean more about him than ye, Simon." She chewed her lip. "John doesn't exactly let many people close."

"Well that's just bullshit. He's got more friends than the rest of us got combined."

"Maybe so," Gwen's mouth drew into a tight, thin line, like a papercut. "I dunno. All I know is from back home..."

"He ain't have friends?"

"Oh no, everyone loved John." Gwen paused. "Well, right up 'til... they..."

She looked as though she wanted to continue, but kept catching

herself before the words could leave her mouth.

Ghost watched her, his patience longstanding.

“Listen, Simon. I dunno how it was wherever you grew up. Certainly doubt it was all sunshine an’ daisies. But here... small town an’ tha’... people tend to live in each other’s pockets. Word travels, things never stay private, an’ they never stay true.”

Gwen turned the tap off with a decisive squeak and rounded to face Ghost fully as she spoke.

“And our John.. well.. he felt things deep, y’know. Was never one ta let things go.”

Memories of easy laughter, relentless attempts at nonchalance with arms slung over tensed shoulders, snatched at Ghost’s thoughts.

“S’that really true?”

Gwen released a sigh that sounded like it had been building for years.

“Aye. So John likes to *be* everyone’s friend. He won’t let on. But tha’ boy... he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, though ye’d never ken. If he could carry everyone else’s troubles too, best believe he would. Always has tae do his bit. Y’know, reckon he’s one of the last real do-gooders you lot have left, eh?”

Ghost thought for a moment. “Not far off.”

“No offence to yersael, Simon.”

“None taken.”

“All I’m tryin’ ta say is, last he was here, the John I knew had a wee habit of actin’ different to how he really felt. Never really let many folk get ta know him, not properly. An’... that since he’s been back here with you, I haven’t seen tha’. He seems... a lot more himself.”

She wiped her hands on her coveralls. “Take that as ye will.”

She didn’t wait for Ghost to move this time, pushing past him with decisive purpose.

Ghost stayed where he was, caught in the mid-morning sun, feeling his lungs collapse inside of him.

—

They were in the living room, Ghost still working on processing Gwen's earlier words, the two of them swimming in the lazy warmth of the afternoon, when the knocking came.

They were both up in seconds, well-trained, feeling the urgency of each strike, Johnny scrambling to his feet from where he'd sat cross-legged on the tapestry rug, Ghost heaving up from the couch in moments. Catching the other's eye, they both moved at once.

Both of them crowding the hallway, Johnny reached the door first and wrenched it open. Gwen faced them from the step, gesturing behind her.

"Got another one comin'," she wheezed. "She needs help."

Ghost felt his heart in his throat as Gwen led them though the farm and into the sheep pen. She didn't stop to wait, just pointed at Johnny, then to the ewe, then dropped to her knees next to her.

Johnny nodded, coming to kneel by the ewe's head, taking her head into his lap and holding her with gentle hands. Almost instinctively, he stroked one thumb up and down the bridge of the ewe's nose, soothing her.

Ghost stood between the two of them, feeling supremely out of place. He wasn't used to it—he needed to be functional, needed to be needed. *Dead weight* was a concept he'd lived his entire life trying to avoid.

Gwen's mouth twisted with concentration as she worked, and, after a while of shifting, she glanced to Ghost. "Wanta try?"

Slowly, Ghost nodded.

Crouching next to her, Ghost felt Gwen's hands move away, replaced by his own.

"Jus pull 'er towards ye. That's it," she said gently.

A complicated mix of feelings swelled inside him, completely unintelligible.

But...

Something was *wrong*. The warning clamoured in his chest before he

had a chance to fully process it, his mind fixating on the feeling beneath his fingers.

It was cold. It hadn't been cold last time. *Why was it so fucking cold?*

Why couldn't he feel its breath?

Ghost's hand slid over a slick, unmoving plane of skin and fur and viscera, and felt an awful, rag-doll weight slump against his arms.

The lamb was dead.

It was a sensation that was familiar to him in the worst possible way. A putrid, long-dead body in his grasp, it felt so terribly similar to how it had back then, in that mire of his past, in that *box*-

He stood too quickly, reeling, and left the pen without a single word.

Someone called after him. He couldn't hear who.

It was a wonder he found the drain in time.

Wrenching the mask from his face, Ghost rounded the far corner of the barn to the faucet, and retched, once, twice.

Suddenly alone, he couldn't suppress the way his body shook anymore. The awful, cloying stench of rotten flesh clung to him, slick and slippery and fresh in his mind, and then Simon was there, still trapped in that suffocating box with that thing, that inhuman, vestigial omen of what he was to become. He had never made it out of that coffin. He could never see light again.

He coughed again, stomach turning itself inside out. More speaking came from behind him, but it was too late for him to be able to distinguish the voice. The world around him blanked out, fuzzing into grey-white nothingness, and he closed his eyes.

How ignorant he had been, to ever think he could leave that life behind.

—

There was a sharp squeak from a tap and a shock of warmth jolted him back to life. He blinked at the bathroom surrounding him. He'd moved. He remembered the feeling of his legs moving, someone guiding him, the fuzz of overlapping voices. With another shiver, he clung to the sensations, trying to ground himself.

Water spread warmth across the backs of his hands, and he felt something move against his skin.

“Back with us?”

It was Johnny’s voice that spoke, gentler than he’d ever known it.

Then, abjectly, he realised it was Johnny’s *hands* as well, guiding his own beneath the stream of warm water, light touches sloughing the traces of death from between his fingers.

The touch of foreign skin against his own should have terrified him. Ghost would have made to pull away, but he found that he couldn’t bring himself to move, something about the touch rooting him to the ground. It wasn’t the same as what he’d felt before. This wasn’t the spongy, ice-cold feeling that lingered in his mind. It was just Soap’s hands, warm and solid and alive, roughened by callouses along his fingertips.

Ghost clung to them like a lifeline, feeling the pulse that thrummed beneath Johnny’s skin.

“S’alright, Si,” Johnny whispered. “You’re alright.”

Ghost didn’t speak. He couldn’t. He closed his eyes again, focusing on the tentative drag of Johnny’s touch against his fingers. The silence between them was thick and heavy, choking his thoughts.

Seconds waded by, slowing into aeons.

He felt Johnny’s hands leave him, and then the cool absence of water as the tap squeaked again.

Then they were back, quick as they’d left, at his shoulders this time. Slowly, strong hands guided him backwards until the backs of his knees met the edge of the bath, and Ghost eased himself down.

Ghost looked up and met Johnny’s eyes for the first time. The expression he saw was crushing, the fear behind it, that aching worry.

Johnny’s hands didn’t leave him. Another toe over the line, another unspoken boundary crossed.

“I.. ah.. I got you a towel, an’ some clothes, in case ye’d like to shower.”

Ghost nodded absently.

“Christ...I... I’m so fucking sorry.”

What had he left to say to that? Ghost couldn’t bring himself to explain. All he could do was sit there, immobile, and beg his mind to stay in one piece long enough for Johnny’s back to be turned. Long enough that he wouldn’t have to explain his pathetic longing to keep going, to push through, to ignore the glaringly obvious, despite every part of his being recognising that he couldn’t.

“It’s not..” Johnny started, but his voice gave out before the end of the second syllable.

“Don’t.” It was all Ghost had left in him.

He closed his eyes again.

The door clicked quietly, and he was alone.

—

Ghost tipped his head back against the spray of water in the shower, feeling still-warming rivulets caressing the shapes of his features, gathering in the seam of his lips.

For a long time, he didn’t move. Just stood there, beneath the water. Hoping it would take the top layer of his skin off with the dirt that clung to him. Wishing it would fill his lungs, drown him as he stood there, muffle the echo chamber that was his mind.

It didn’t do any of that. Just traced warm fingers across raised scar tissue.

He scrubbed shower gel through his hair quickly, trying not to touch his own skin, and turned the tap off.

The air in the bathroom was tepid and the humid breaths he drew into his lungs coated him with a slick layer of unease from the inside out. The foggy mirror blurred his reflection, something he was infinitely thankful for— Ghost couldn’t tell what he might have looked like with all his layers of protection stripped back and scrubbed off, and he wasn’t keen to find out.

The last time he’d looked into a mirror and met the eyes of *Simon Riley*, he’d broken it.

It was a childish move, cowardice through and through, but he hadn’t

known how else to cope with the sudden, searing fury in his chest, that vicious frustration that burned through him whenever he was faced with his own truth, his humanity.

Price had found him there— evidently alerted by the sharp sound of glass breaking— curled beneath his bathroom sink. A vision of pathetic vulnerability, clutching shards of mirror and the last of his dignity between his bleeding fists.

He'd worn a matching bandage on each hand for weeks. Parroted whichever fabrication Price had given him as a paper-thin excuse for medical leave. Poured surgical spirit on the cuts every night, felt the aching burn that seeped into them and spread through his nerves like fire. A daily ablution, a reminder of just what it took to keep his former self at bay.

He wondered what would happen now, if he stopped trying to run from that version of himself.

Then he sighed around a ten-ton weight in his chest. It was no use thinking about impossibilities.

Outside, evening had quietly died, the golden sunset fading into the blue half-light of dusk, leaving the bathroom shrouded in grey, toneless darkness.

The kitchen light clicked on suddenly, flooding warm light beneath the gap in the door. Ghost watched shadows skitter back and forth across the bathroom tiles, the strange shapes shifting as Gwen and Johnny moved about in the kitchen.

Faintly, Ghost could hear them speaking.

"...not on. Ach, poor lad," Gwen was saying, sounding strained. "First time I hadta deal with it, I got the boke as well. Sure tookit hard though, he alright?"

A chair scraped against flagstone.

"He's had a rough go, Gwin. Jus' leave it, yeah?"

"Aye...still..."

He could hear Johnny's sigh from across the hall, right through the door.

Feeling a horrible crawling sensation on his skin, Ghost grabbed the door handle and steeled himself. There was a particular kind of debasement that came with moments like this, he thought. The aftermath of an overdose of honesty.

Look at me and all of my lies, his entrance said. *I tricked you.*

I'm nothing like you want me to be.

Gwen gave him a smile as he stepped out from the hall and into the kitchen, raising her chin in a greeting.

Johnny didn't do either. He just looked at him, face impassively blank, words swirling in his eyes.

Ghost crossed the floor and sat opposite Johnny at the table, feeling a little like a coffin at a funeral, all eyes on him, a spectacle of tragedy to collectively sigh at. *There he is, whatever's left of him... such a sad sight.*

The silence was a physical coating on his skin— it made him want to scratch at himself, pull it off somehow. He trained his eyes on the marbled wood-grain of the mahogany table, anything to avoid having to answer to those searching looks.

Then, after a beat, Gwen asked, “tea?”

Call that a tonal shift, a small voice in the back of Ghost's head said.

Gwen looked between them, then she pushed off the counter she'd been leaning against with a complicated smile. “Actually... I'll be right back.”

Johnny didn't look after he as she left the kitchen, keeping his eyes trained resolutely on Ghost.

It was only when Ghost heard the front door shut that he spoke.

“Hasn't happened in a long time.”

Johnny nodded once, slowly, staying silent.

“I don't want to talk about it.”

Johnny said, shrugging, “I'm not askin' you to.”

And that was that.

Gwen returned a few minutes later, a clatter from the hall dipping into Ghost and Johnny's shared silence. She brushed into the kitchen and, with a flourish, deposited a glass bottle onto the table with a thunk. Amber liquid sloshed around inside of it— scotch.

"*Uisge beatha*," she said. "Bit better than tea, aye?"

Johnny gave a snort, raising his eyebrows

"Our Lt.'s a bourbon drinker."

She winced. "Ooh, child, we'll hafta change that."

Ghost rolled his eyes.

Maybe it was the warmth of the whisky he sipped, or the tentative companionship of the three of them sprawled around that table, but Ghost found that his stomach began to settle quickly, replaced by an odd feeling that he couldn't quite place. It didn't ache, or tighten, or clamour for his attention. No— for the first time in weeks, Ghost felt ... nothing at all. Just the precarious lightness that came with the release of a heavy weight.

It was nice.

Conversation flowed easily between them, spanning back and forth across their contrasting worlds. Gwen told them of her first year raising a flock on her own, how she'd had to chase seventy sheep back across four separate neighbour's fields following a daring escape.

"Don't think Tom Wallis ever really forgave me fer taerin' up his barley field.."

Ghost and Johnny swapped stories of each other's most daring feats, punctured by admonishments and corrections from the other.

"Bastard nearly carked it firin' outta the passenger side of the truck— wasn't payin' attention and a street sign damn near clipped his fuckin' 'ead off."

"Oh that's *not* how it happened and you know it, Lt."

"Seemed pretty close to me."

"Well if you'd *kept yer eyes on the damn road*, we wouldna swerved.."

Eventually, the conversation turned to Gwen and Johnny's childhood,

guided by a surprisingly vulnerable musing from Gwen.

“Sounds like yer living’ a pure class life, John,” she said, swirling a finger along the rim of her glass. “Hell if I don’t miss havin’ ye around, though.”

Johnny sighed. “Gwinnie...”

“No, no, I know. You made the righ’ choice to leave when ye did. Just.. I wish they hadnae made it so fuckin’ hard on ye ta come back.”

“Couldn’t pay me to live inna village again, Gwin. Especially not if that bastard’s still knockin’ about.”

“What was his name again?” Gwen asked, her voice half-punctured by a chuckle.

A groan escaped Johnny’s throat and he let his forehead meet the table with a dull noise, one hand still clutched around his glass. “Archie fuckin’ Blythe.”

Gwen’s laugh sustained itself through her next sip from her own glass. “Ah, yeah. That fuckin’ melt.”

Johnny looked up at Ghost, his chin perched on the table. “He was some stocky Dundonian lad on our footy team. We used ta knock ‘round together after training an’ things. Pair of right dopes we were.”

Gwin made an affirming noise, her lips pulled thin.

Jonny continued. “An’ that was all grand, till...”

He paused, considering.

““Till we started going out.”

Understanding unfurled in Ghost’s chest. He watched, unmoving, as Johnny sat up, rubbing the back of his neck. He wore a small, pained sort of smile— it was a look Ghost recognised by now. The featureless, feelingless expression Johnny hid behind, a mask of his own design.

“An’... I dunno. It was fine, for a while. Then— I guess he got cold feet. Started spreadin’ shite ‘round, an’ it made it back to my family.”

Beside him, Gwen shook her head bitterly. “*Rat bastard.*”

“Don’ get me wrong,” Johnny said, ignoring her. “I wasnae a pariah or

anything. It's just...well, you know how it is. Things were always gonna be different after. So I had to scarper."

The air in the room seemed to shift as Johnny spoke. Ghost watched his posture straighten, his brows drawing tight. He ran a hand through his hair, avoiding Ghost and Gwen's gazes, tension rippling through his features.

Ghost didn't take his eyes off him. "Your family... made you leave?"

There was a beat, and Johnny sighed wearily. "No. No, they didn't."

He was quiet for a long time, then. Ghost watched him pick at the skin around his fingernails, sentences forming on his lips and then dropping away soundlessly. When he finally spoke again, his voice was hardened.

"It was like, overnight, they jus' sorta gave up on me. Started seein' *through* me, y'know? An' if I stayed... I'd be giving up on myself, too. So I wanted to be the one to walk away."

The confession dropped into the silence of the night with a weighted thump. Ghost felt his vision of Johnny dissolve, then reform itself inside him, in the span of a single second.

And then he imagined a younger version of him, barely seventeen, fresh-faced and already so full of hurt, his hair close-cropped and his uniform sitting awkwardly on shoulders that hadn't finished growing up yet. How much he must have been aching, to search for reprieve in the *military* of all things— finding desperate relief in their violence, searching for himself in the jagged shards of the bloody aftermath.

It was a feeling that echoed deep from within his own life.

Johnny's eyes stayed trained on his glass with the words, as if he was afraid of what he might see if he looked up to meet Ghost's gaze.

Quietly, Gwen rose from her seat and crossed to Johnny's side of the table. She let one hand rest on his shoulder for a moment, giving it a light squeeze. Johnny looked up at her, mouth drawn into that thin, watery smile. They exchanged glances, a wordless interaction, and then Gwen crossed to the doorway.

"The past is the past. Ye'll always have a place here," she whispered. "Both of ye."

And then she slipped away, back out into the night.

Ghost mulled the statement over in his mind, turning it around with each breath, inspecting it for fault-lines and cracks, some indication of a hidden agenda.

He found none. Just another piece of that solid, heartfelt honesty that he never seemed to be able to replicate.

Damn him if he wasn't trying, though.

It was completely foreign to him, being reached for. The way Johnny and Gwen both chased him down with every attempt he made to hide. Letting himself get used to it was the most dangerous thing he'd ever done.

But Ghost still opened his mouth and let his next sentences fall out before he could think enough to catch them.

"I'm glad you left. You found where you belong."

He felt his core tense with the words, acutely aware of just how blunt they'd been, how grotesquely awkward the statement was. He'd royally fucked it now— he could already see Soap's expression withdrawing itself. He didn't dare to speak again, afraid of just how much worse he could make the situation.

Then, Johnny's expression shifted.

And he said, softer than anything Ghost had ever heard from him before, "I'm glad, too."

They sat together for a long time, as the moon rose outside the window and the hills fell into darkness. The ice in Ghost's glass began to melt, bobbing beneath the surface of the dregs of his scotch. He watched it sink and resurface, imagining himself in its place, at the mercy of those fiery waves. He doubted it would be any different to the way he felt now. Everything felt so out of reach— he was drowning without a foothold in these constant waves of sincerity.

Johnny tipped back the last of his drink, holding the empty glass up to the light. "You're the first person I've ever told, that."

The moonlight refracted off the glass, scattering a kaleidoscope pattern across the kitchen table. Ghost's eyes traced the shifting shapes, following their pattern until he found Johnny's gaze again.

“Why me?”

The intangible question, the one that had been screaming itself hoarse in Ghost’s mind for far too long, materialised in front of them. It was a physical weight, pulling at the air between them.

Johnny’s eyes didn’t leave him for a second.

“Cause it’s you.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry :,) things will start looking up soon, I promise...there is romance in here somewhere..

Feel free to yell at me on twitter: <https://twitter.com/flowersferns>

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

cw: oblique references to suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

That night, a vast expanse of space opened itself up in Ghost's mind as he slept.

He stood on the edge of a sheer face of rock, the hazy grey-blue of the far horizon stretching for miles in front of him, uninterrupted by a single feature of landscape. He could feel the lip of the jagged surface beneath his feet, the way his weight shifted dangerously with every breath he took.

He didn't look down.

Either he was dying, or already dead. The limitless space was a vacuum of sound. The silence of it pressed in on his ears, pressure building behind his eyes, dizziness pulling at the pit in his stomach.

He still didn't look down.

"Ye don't have to worry."

Ghost started at the sound of Johnny's voice so close to him.

The man smiled from where he sat next to Ghost, legs dangling over the edge. He sat back with a contented sigh, hands clasped in his lap.

"It won't hurt," he said.

Ghost stared at him. "What won't?"

"Any of it."

"I'm not afraid of it hurting."

Johnny shrugged. "Then why are you afraid at all?"

"Because..." He faltered, considering his next words carefully.

"Because it's all I know."

He looked down.

He already knew what he would see, but the bloated corpse that greeted him at the bottom of the pit still turned his stomach. He swallowed around a solid, icy terror.

“I can’t, Johnny. I can’t go down there.”

“You can. I trust you.”

Simon looked at Johnny. “Why?”

Johnny shrugged, sealing his fate with a single movement.

“Cause it’s you.”

Because it's you. Because it's you.

He fell forward into nothingness.

The words were still ringing clear in his head when he hit the ground and startled into consciousness with a physical jolt. They looped and spun around his thoughts, knotting themselves firmly in place around those old, gnarled fears that existed inside him.

It was a mockery of a real sentence. He could recognise the pattern each word made when strung together— he could trace his voice around the syllables, feel the way they blended into one another, hear the lack of dissonance behind them.

But they made no sense.

Ghost lurched from his bed too quickly, feet catching on the uneven floorboards, stumbling upright. His breaths came loud and fast in the soundless darkness.

He stood there, motionless, for what felt like hours, letting the echo in his head subside. He could almost feel the way his brain ticked over, hear the way it stuttered to a stop with the periodic, reedy cracking sound of an engine cooling.

Outside, the sky was inky-black. No light filtered through the flimsy lace curtains— the night was still deep and endless, hours before the dawn.

But even so, trying his best not to think, Ghost pulled a cardigan over his t-shirt, avoided the creaking floorboards, and slipped quietly out of the cottage again. He couldn’t stay in his room a second longer— he craved air in his lungs, open space, a distraction. He needed a kind of

peace that sleep couldn't provide.

The farm was becoming familiar, even in the dark, and Ghost's feet carried him quickly out of the courtyard with practiced stealth. Nothing moved around him, a lull of sleep coating the midnight air in a balmy stillness. The landscape was barely visible in the night—the mountain range was nothing more than a hulking dark shadow, a silent, shrouded observer to his movements.

There were stones littering the trampled dirt path. Ghost could feel them underfoot, small sharp shapes poking at him through the soles of his shoes as he walked.

He stopped before he reached the barn, his bones grinding to a sudden, unconscious halt.

Ghost froze. Self-awareness sank its teeth into his throat as he turned and faced the large red number one, that garish painted slash that labelled the stall door he stood in front of.

What the hell was he doing here?

Swallowing the thought, his trembling hands reached out and unlatched the upper part of the stall door. It swung outwards with a shaky groan, almost too loud, and he caught the edge of it before it could hit the stone wall.

Feeling equal parts awkward and resolute, Ghost leaned forwards and looked into the stall.

A ewe and her lamb, asleep in a bed of soft straw, still the very same as they had been on the first night he'd seen them. The moon speared a beam of light across the ground, catching the edge of their intertwined bodies in sharp, blue-lit focus. They were an entire world, encapsulated. To them, nothing existed except each other.

Ghost stood and watched them for a long time, feeling his breathing hitch, then even out.

After a few minutes, his reasoning got the better of him, and he re-latched the stall door, leaving the animals in peace. Something still kept him there, though, rooted to the ground, anchored to those sharp stones. Making a baseless decision, he knelt to the ground, turning to sit so that his back pressed against the stall door, and heaved a heavy breath.

When he tipped his head back, he could see the stars, speckles of brightness twinkling down from above the darkened hills.

Time was a conniving bastard.

Before, each moment had seemed to drag into an eon, clinging to him like a burr. But now, suddenly four more days had passed, skittering by completely unnoticed before Ghost's mind had the chance to ground itself again.

Unwilling to wait for him, life burst forth from every corner of the farm, with all of its vigour and shamelessness, from the lambs coming daily to the hogweed sprouts vehemently pushing themselves through the cobbles of the courtyard. Each new existence clawed away another piece of Ghost's iron-clad facade— his reality blurred, leaving him caught in a haze of emotion and exhaustion that he didn't have the capacity to decipher.

It didn't help that his sleeplessness was turning out to be less of an isolated incident and more of a *new normal*.

Ghost was not a good sleeper at the best of times. Now, he wasn't sleeping at all.

Instead, he repeated his nightly ritual, his back pressed against that red-splattered stall door, head craned upward to map the stars, breathing in the night breeze like it was his first time breathing air.

Weariness, bone deep and all-consuming, curdled into actual nausea in his stomach as he leaned himself against the open barn gate. Rusted flakes of paint nipped at his forearms when he rested them against the top of it, each of them pinching just enough to cut through the fog in his mind.

There was too much noise in the barn where Gwen and Johnny still worked. A cacophony of human and animal sounds alike, blending in the air, crashed against his liquefied mind. Ghost closed his eyes, sucked a breath in through his teeth, focused on the points of contact between him and the cool metal of the gate. He just needed a moment to himself. He needed a night's sleep that wasn't poisoned by his traitorous mind, by the memories that sank in his gut like stones cast into the sea. He needed to be able to shut his eyes and see nothing but darkness.

He needed to be able to live a full day and not think about Johnny once.

The gate groaned suddenly, bearing too much weight, a shrill noise of metal against metal. Ghost cracked open an eye.

Johnny leaned with his back against the gate, arms hooked through the railing.

Ghost's list of mental needs crumpled. Two strikes out of four, in one fell swoop. That was the way, when it came to Soap—he crashed into Ghost's mind all at once, overshadowing everything else.

“Break time?” Johnny asked, scrutinising the side of his face. “You look knackered.”

Ghost ignored a crawling sensation up the back of his neck. “No, all good.”

There was another ominous vocalisation from the railing as Johnny twisted to face him, unhooking one arm and shifting his weight to the other. He levelled him with a *look*.

“Yer no’ actually tha’ good of a liar.”

If only you knew, the voice inside him countered.

What he said aloud was, “What difference does it make?”

Metal squealed around a shrug from Johnny's shoulders. “Good question. You still look like shite, though.”

“Careful. I'd write you up for that one, Sergeant.”

Johnny's laugh was a bark torn from his throat. “Thought you said I was in charge here?”

Ghost couldn't have pinpointed the exact moment the atmosphere between them shifted, but at some point it had, and now there was a heaviness to the air around them that set about working heat under his skin, pushing itself into his veins. He shoved off the gate with more force than necessary, trying to escape the feeling, running a hand through his hair.

“Fine, you win. Let's go.”

From inside the barn, Gwen's voice floated over to them. “You lads

heading in? Mind gettin' a thing of iodine from the shed fer me 'fore ye go?"

Johnny shot a thumbs up back at her and matched Ghost's stride, cheerfully directing him away from the dirt path to the shed that leaned, decrepit, against the side of the barn. There was something electric in his step, a similar sort of energy that he radiated right before missions. Ghost watched his lively footfalls, tempering the strange, sickly warmth inside him.

Moss coated the shed from inside out, casting out a damp, warm scent similar to the smell of the barn itself. The overgrowth of it muffled the sounds the two of them made as they entered— it created a bizarre, natural sort of anechoic chamber, an effect that meant each small sound that they made pressed far too close on Ghost's eardrums for comfort.

The space was small. Crushingly so, already overcrowded with the two of them. Ghost reached the back wall first and peered at the rows of shelves mounted to it. They were crammed full of tools, bottles of chemicals, rags, gloves, anything and everything Ghost have ever seen used in connection with outdoor work. It was a wonder Gwen ever found anything in the mess, though— there seemed to be no order to the objects at all, lumped haphazardly wherever there was space.

Nevertheless, he scanned each shelf dutifully, searching for iodine.

Seconds ticked by, time slowing down again, unsteady his mind. Eventually, he conceded to defeat, craning his head back to meet Johnny's eyes.

"Here," Johnny said, looking past him.

He reached around Ghost's side, stretching to the highest shelf and taking down an unmarked plastic bottle. "Found it."

They were in each other's space now, looking at one another. Johnny seemed completely at ease, one hand clutching the bottle of antiseptic, fingers drumming lightly on this lid, a smile threatening the corners of his mouth. His eyes flickered, dropping to his hands and then back to meet Ghost's stare. When they locked eyes, Ghost felt that red-hot feeling in his blood flare. He thought of Johnny's three immutable words. He thought of everything, and then nothing at all.

"Johnny. Move."

Johnny didn't obey. His smile cracked free, forming into an indefinite shape, tinged with something a little like wonder.

Heat. Low, roiling heat. Ghost was going to suffocate.

"What are you playing at? *Move*, Sergeant."

"Simon."

The word ground him to a halt, his lungs bottoming out inside of him at the sound. He'd never heard Johnny say his name with such solid purpose before.

Ghost felt his mouth move, but no words came out, so he simply stared at Soap. The expression he wore was completely lost on Ghost — it was unreadable in a way that made him nervous, of all things. Inside him, his heart thundered.

"No need for the titles, aye?" Johnny said, gesturing to the space around them. "There's no one here."

He figured that if he stayed silent, some part of this indecipherable scenario might clarify itself.

Johnny scrutinised him with an intensity that Ghost physically felt.

"I've been meaning to ask," he murmured. Even his voice sounded strange, quiet but grounded, filling in all the gaps in Ghost's brain with a dangerous kind of anticipation.

Hoarsely, Ghost spoke. "Ask me what?"

"Gwen gets to call you Simon." Johnny took a step closer. "What about me?"

There wasn't nearly enough space between them. Ghost felt himself begin to melt, edges blurring into the warmth of the air they shared.

"Don't think it's fair, do you?"

Another step.

His diaphragm was too tight for his chest, seizing between each breath. The only thought his mind could produce was a clamouring warning, perched on top of every inhale. Danger.

He tried to steady his voice as he spoke. "I'm not your fuckin' keeper,

Johnny. Do what you like.”

If only Johnny would stop looking at him, looking *into* him with that complicated expression, equal parts awe and grief, like he was already sizing up a tombstone in his mind, maybe Ghost would feel a little more solid. Maybe he’d be able to gather the shattered pieces of his dignity and shape them into something functional again. Maybe he’d be able to purge that new, awful, unending fear that rippled through him whenever they got too close to one another.

“Simon,” Johnny murmured. “Simon, Simon.”

The word had never sounded less like something that belonged to Ghost.

Johnny took his final step forward. Their chests were nearly brushing now, both of them breathing the same air. Connected without touching, the push-pull of it drowned him—the way they were drawn together with each inhale, then ripped hopelessly apart in an exhale.

A surveying look, blue eyes roving over him. He watched as Johnny tipped his head slowly to one side, fixated on the way the soft expanse of his throat flexed with the movement.

Don’t do that, Ghost’s mind warned. *I’ll tear you open.*

Johnny inhaled deeply, lips parted.

And Ghost thought about what it would feel like, to give in. Weakness churned in his stomach. Johnny was so *close*, he was looking at him in that unplaceable way, almost like he knew—

“I like it,” came Johnny’s whisper. “I like your name.”

His voice rasped in his throat, a hair’s breadth from cracking. “At least one of us does.”

There was a long pause. Johnny took another weighted inhale.

“Simon—“

The same word, but a different sound this time, like Johnny had tacked a question onto the end of it.

The end of the sentence was lost as, suddenly, the iodine clattered to the ground between them. The lid stayed in Johnny’s hand, the container coming loose and landing askew on the ground.

The tension in the air broke.

“*Shite*,” Johnny said, scrambling to pick it up.

Ghost just watched as the red-brown liquid spilled between the cracks in the floorboards. He felt it seeping into the moss, dissipating into the earth, and thought about all the wounds that could have been healed by that bottle, how many infections could have been staved off. He thought about the scars lining his arms, his face, his entire being.

He thought about Johnny’s hands gripping his bloodied face, that bullet-graze that he couldn’t bring himself to look at anymore.

When Johnny picked the bottle up, it was already empty.

—

The evening brought a sense of tranquility and a heavy bout of rain with it.

Relieved from their duties on the farm, Ghost and Soap relayed themselves to the poky living room, splayed on either end of the couch, stewing in a thick silence that sat heavy with their refusal to acknowledge the past afternoon.

Dunking the last of their shortbread into his cup, Johnny watched Ghost as he read, tucked into his corner of the sofa. Ghost could feel the eyes on him more than he could see them, that sniper’s gaze he’d been trained to sense, a prickle at the back of his neck that had him stiffening unconsciously.

“You know tha’ I can hear you.”

He shot a bemused glance over the top of his book.

“What, am I *reading too loud* for you?”

Ghost expected a laugh from Johnny for the quip. Instead, Johnny just tightened his grip on his mug, a frown pinching between his eyebrows. “I meant at night.”

That was enough to make him snap the book shut and sit up properly on the couch.

“What?”

Johnny clutched his mug in his lap. “Ye really think I don’t know yer

not sleepin’?”

As a matter of fact, he had. Ghost looked at him now, eyes flitting over Soap’s pinched features, mind racing.

Johnny ran a thumb along the mug’s handle, levelling his gaze firmly on it as he continued.

“I hear you leavin’. Jus’... yeah. I know what it’s like.” He thought for a moment. Then, suddenly, he sat up. “Tomorrow...get up early, alright?”

Ghost watched him warily. “Why?”

Johnny shifted forward in his seat, a thin smile on his lips. “Remember what I promised?”

Promises were few and far between in Ghost’s life. Wracking his brain, he gave Johnny a puzzled look.

The man smiled, earnest and bright.

“I’m gonna show you the mountains.”

—

The sun broke through the blue haze of dawn just as they reached the first ridge of Bidean Nam Bian. The mountain was a maw of jagged teeth, peaks rising and collapsing in an asynchronous pattern, sheer rock faces carving angular lines into the looming mountaintop.

The two of them climbed quickly, their rigorous training guiding each carefully placed footstep among the loose stones of the trail. Ghost felt burning in his lungs as he climbed, exhaustion and anxiety in equal parts.

They stopped to rest at the halfway mark, a few hours out from the summit.

Johnny slumped down heavily beside Ghost, stretching his legs out in front of him with a contented sigh. His knee knocked into Ghost’s, becoming a focal point of Ghost’s attention.

“Not a bad view, eh?” Johnny exhaled around a smile, *always a damned smile*, and Ghost’s heart severed itself from his lungs.

Ghost looked at him, then out over the landscape, and felt his heart

swell with longing.

Having the concept in his mind was already too much for him, the weight of that terrible wanting he felt. He didn't know how to cope with it, this newfound selfishness. He wasn't built for it.

The only thing he'd ever really been accustomed to longing for was a quiet exit.

It had already seemed too much to ask for, before— to die when nobody was looking. Preferably on a sunny day.

But now he'd been spoiled, like a dog with its canine teeth removed, resigned to eating out of the palm of a hand, and the small concessions he hinged his life on seemed trivial in comparison to *this*. Soap's arm brushing his. Skin against skin. Every secret they shared, cracked open and spilled onto that mahogany kitchen table. The easy familiarity of these hills, the terrifying speed at which all of these feelings had found the fault-lines in his facade.

It was impossible luxury, all of it. A luxury he should never have been allowed to understand, and now he craved it idiotically, frantically, hating himself more with every urge.

He had no idea who he was becoming in the face of it.

They were quiet for a while, both of them staring out at the valleys and ridges that sprawled out around them. Johnny traced an idle shape across his kneecap as he rested his hand there, small circular motions that Ghost could almost feel across his own skin.

"D'you remember," he started, eyes still trained on the surrounding terrain. "I told ye that Gwen took me here, last time I visited?"

"Yeah," Ghost answered, watching him.

"Same visit as when I—"

"When you lost the plot in the sheep pen?"

Johnny chuckled. "Aye, same visit. I was such a fuckin' mess."

There was something he wasn't saying. Ghost could feel the way his sentences dragged down with the weight of it, each one of them stopping just short of where they'd meant to.

After another stretch of silence, Johnny found the words.

“Y’know, I almost quit the force.”

It sounded almost as if the sentence caused him genuine pain to say aloud. Even so, he continued.

“Back then...I was so fuckin’ lost, Simon. I felt so outta place back home, and couldn’t find my feet on the job fer the life of me, either.. was gettin’ into fights, written up fer it, all that shit. I came back from my first tour hangin’ on by a thread... anyway, I was up here, looking up at these hills, an’ all I could think about, was how *simple* things are up here. Everything’s stable. Nothing’s ever wrong, ‘cause everything’s been exactly where it needs to be, forever. I wanted that. Somewhere that never changed, that didn’t change me, either.”

“So why didn’t you quit?”

It was a blunt question, but there was no point in softening it— they had both traded too much honesty in the past few weeks to care.

Johnny looked at him then, properly.

“Cause you were right. I found my place, in the end.” He ducked his head, breaking eye contact as he added,

“Can’t imagine bein’ anywhere else, now”.

Something in Ghost’s mind shifted, clicking into place. It was like a switch had been flipped, setting something into motion that he thought was immovable. He felt his body’s reaction to it more than he understood the sense of the thought, a cool tingling that started in his chest and spread outward, lancing all the way to his fingertips.

—

The feeling inside him lasted all the way to the summit.

They took longer than they needed to on their approach— it was as if they were both aware that something was going to end as soon as they crested the final ridge. Still, they climbed, and when they reached the top they stood side by side, breathing in quiet exaltation.

Scotland stretched broad and beautiful beneath them, like it was theirs and theirs only, two kings atop the highest peak. Ghost had never felt the full depth of his own longing before, but now he swore he could reach down and touch the bottom of that insatiable pit inside him.

This time, he was the first to speak.

“I can’t believe you grew up here. I can’t believe all this... is *yours*.”

Johnny hummed quietly, a warm presence at his right shoulder. “It never felt much like home, till now.”

But he wasn’t looking at the scenery.

He was looking at Ghost. Looking right into the gaps between the lies Ghost pushed to the front of his mind, the barricade his spineless honesty hid behind.

“Simon?”

Johnny’s voice curled around the edges of his long-dead name, shaking life into the letters with each breath. Ghost didn’t meet his gaze—he couldn’t. Because if he did, he knew he’d find more answers than he was capable of looking for.

His eyes stayed fixed on the landscape. He didn’t speak.

“Why’d you come here with me?”

The valley below them was so beautiful, it punched the air from Ghost’s lungs. He focused on the outline of the fields, the way the colours of the landscape changed with every bracketed square of land.

“Simon. Why?”

He could jump into that valley, find the edge of the precipice and fall forwards into nothing, the same way dream-Johnny had told him to. He would, too, if this Johnny asked him.

“You know.” Ghost’s voice rasped, a blade against stone. “Surely you know.”

Because how could he not? How could Johnny possibly be pretending that what they had was normal, when the gaps between Ghost’s hollow words would forever echo *it’s you, it’s you too, it’s always going to be you—?*

How could they keep looking past the things they both knew, every time they saw each other?

How could they ever come back from this?

The precipice beyond them loomed. Ghost could already feel the pull of it, that unsteady vertigo, the knowledge of the impending fall. He could already feel the impact of the ending, the way it would rattle his teeth inside his skull and crush his bones to powder.

“Look at me.”

Ghost did.

Johnny spoke with the same tone that he might have prayed with. Quiet but sharp, desperate and deferential in the same breath. “I know.”

Not here, Ghost’s mind begged. *I’m not ready. I still need time to pretend.*

In the middle distance, rain was falling over Johnny’s home town again, a slate-grey thunderhead threatening the golden morning light. The clouds would move on soon, and the rain would find them.

“How long?” Johnny asked, his voice small.

Ghost looked away again, feeling nothing but the betrayal of his own weak-willed heart, with the way it writhed inside his ribs. His thoughts were singular and deafening: *he knows, he’s always known, and now it’s over.*

Despite himself, he answered. “Always. You know that.”

The soft earnestness in Johnny’s reply was almost heartbreaking. “Maybe I do.”

Neither of them said what they wanted to.

“We should go,” Ghost murmured. “Rain’s coming.”

“Aren’t you gonna ask me?”

“I can’t.” The words he spoke were barely above a whisper now. “I can’t, Johnny. I won’t be able to stand it.”

Johnny’s smile was soaked in grief. “You know what I’d say.”

“It doesn’t make a difference.”

His heart was a black hole, dark and empty and consuming him entirely. Johnny looked at him like he could feel the weight of its gravity. Worse— he looked at him as if he understood.

“Simon.”

Ghost almost turned away again. He felt restless, agonised—he needed to leave before he fell apart completely. He’d been carefully building his entire life around that one solid secret inside him, that vision of Johnny that ruled him completely, and now, having spoken it aloud...he didn’t have that anymore. His foundation had crumbled, in the span of a single sentence. There was nothing left to conceal, and being seen, the way that Johnny saw him-- was already seeing him-- terrified him more than any brutality he’d ever come across.

Who was he, without his secrets?

He didn’t exist at all.

“Don’t let this be the thing you run away from,” Johnny said, too softly. “Not when—“ He stopped, made an odd sound in his throat, almost a sob. “Not when you know I feel the same.”

Ghost closed his eyes and felt the way his chest collapsed. “Johnny. You can’t. We can’t.”

“Why?”

He couldn’t bring himself to answer, couldn’t even bring himself to move, not even when Johnny stepped in close to him again and said,

“It doesn’t change anything.”

That was how it would always be, wasn’t it? It was always going to end up this way. Him running, Johnny chasing. He wondered when they would get tired of it. The truth lurched inside him, a leaden weight in his stomach. It would never work. No amount of beautiful scenery or companionship would change him. He would tear himself apart if he got too comfortable— and if he dared to dream, he would tear Johnny apart too.

But then Johnny’s hands, tentative, barely there, moved to his jaw.

And he said, in a weightless voice, “Can’t this...be okay?”

None of this can. Ghost thought. *But that doesn’t mean anything for me anymore. Not if it’s you.*

And he knew that at his core, he would always be too weak to deny himself it.

He leaned into the palm of Johnny's hand.

"Hey," Johnny whispered.

And then he was kissing him, just like that.

The world didn't end. There was no earth-shattering explosion, no bullet in his skull. No sinkhole opened up in the ground to swallow him whole. There was just the soft heat of Johnny's mouth against his own, the smell of firewood and the taste of coffee, stubble scratching the skin at the side of his mouth. There was the solidness of Johnny's waist beneath his hands, the slope of his spine, the hard edge of his ribs beneath his shirt.

Ghost's heart jackhammered in his chest. Johnny smiled into the kiss.

Simon Riley clawed through the earth and gasped back to life.

And with it, reality crashed over him like a wave. There it was, that cloying fear that rose in his throat like bile, making his nerves seize with a sudden, icy urgency. He felt the way it screamed— *danger, terror, loss*. All of the things he'd lived his whole life trying to outrun, all at once. That was what this feeling cost.

He was right about being weak. He couldn't stomach this.

Harsh and fast, he pulled away.

Johnny followed his movement for just a second, leaning forward into his space and making contact with empty air. Then, eyebrows knitting, he opened his eyes.

"Simon...?"

Ghost was already walking away before the end of Johnny's word.

Chapter End Notes

in which ghost does, all-in-all, far too much thinking.

i announced this briefly on [twt](#) but i recently started a new job, so i apologise for any delays :) the next chapter is a Doozy as well for sure so it might take a bit of time-- thank you to everyone who's been sticking with this story. all your kind comments mean so so much to me ♥◻.

(still humbly asking y'all to bear with me thru the angst...there is hope !!!)

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

*Watching from afar, from the cliffs of my mountain
Looking at all these hills that I have climbed
Was it all for none? No gratification
Or is my sense of self trying to get in my mind?*

- Vista, Richy Mitch & the Coal Miners

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They didn't talk about it.

Not when the rain caught up to them and chased them down the mountain. Not when they came home, shivering and soaked and strung-out. Not in the morning, not in the days that followed, or when those days bloated into weeks.

Instead, the farm took over their lives. Physical exertion overshadowed them, filling in the ruinous, gaping holes in their conversations. They worked from early morning until the end of the afternoon, and each day ended the same, with Ghost wishing the aching rawness in his hands was enough to purge the feeling of Johnny's body beneath his touch.

It never was.

The thing that hurt the most, he'd decided, was the fact that on a surface-level, nothing had changed. He'd been right, to some miserable degree. It didn't matter, knowing that they both shared some semblance of the same aching yearning for one another. They'd learned to live around it before, and now, they barely spared a glance at it, pointedly looking past one another's half-starved expressions, pretending this was how real people behaved.

They were still friends. Ghost spoke around the new, permanent vacuum in his lungs and Johnny still laughed, deeply, genuinely, at every quip he made. They still shared their space, lounging on the creaking living room sofa at the end of each day. They ate together.

Ghost's mask stayed off, and on, as much as it had before.

They could almost be okay with it, he thought.

But then it would get quiet, and in the lull between conversations, Ghost's mind would rush to fill the silence with echoes of their bitten-off confessions. He'd feel his own longing, mirrored back to him through Johnny's desperate mouth against his.

And then he'd feel the full depth of their hollowness, hear the clamouring, overshadowing question, the *what-if-we-could* that hung over them, and he would feel the tatters of his heart flutter with hope.

He swallowed around a bitter taste on his tongue, finding it harder and harder to push the feeling down with each passing day.

—

The nights didn't get easier.

Most of the time, now, he left the cottage before he'd even tried to fall asleep. The crushing weight in his chest seemed to grow every time he woke, so much that even the sight of his bed had his lungs tightening.

So he watched the stars instead. Felt his quiet, unspoken companionship with the sleeping animals. Breathed in, looked up, breathed out. He didn't feel any more human in doing it, but he also didn't feel any more alone.

It took more than a whole week of sleepless nights for his ritual to be interrupted. He'd familiarised himself with his path to the stalls so much that he barely glanced at the farm surrounding him any more, just kept his eyes trained on the cobbles, then the dirt track, finding his path easily through the loose stones that littered the ground.

That night, it was only when he'd reached the stall door that he noticed anything different. As he stopped, he noticed a shifting light among the gravel—pale, watery yellow light that spilled in a broad beam across the ground. He looked up, wary, and saw the same glimmering shade of yellow illuminating the barn at the end of the lane, saw the way it spread outwards, turning the barn into a beacon in the night.

Without thinking, he let himself get drawn to it, approaching slowly and silently, a moth to a flame.

The barn gate was propped open, an upturned empty water bucket shoved hastily into the gap between the gate and the wall, allowing enough space for a person to slip inside. Ghost stopped for a moment, in the silence, curiosity and apprehension at war inside him. He let his professional knowledge bubble to the surface for a moment, listening for the faintest sounds of movement.

He could hear his own breathing first, a steady, rhythmic pull like waves in the ocean. It felt surprisingly refreshing, to ground his senses like that. It was something he'd been neglecting to do for a while, and it had taken its toll. The life he'd lived in the past few weeks had swept him up in its unreality, and, only now, did he realise how close he'd come to drowning in it entirely.

He breathed deeply, focusing again.

Inside the barn, he could hear an electrical hum from the lightbulb inside, and the sound of shuffling, too deliberate to be anything other than human. Then, quieter still, the soft noises he'd come to recognise that belonged to a lamb.

He slipped through the gap in the gate, stopping just beyond the threshold of the barn. Blinking rapidly against the light, he took in his surroundings.

In the closer of the two sheep pens, was Gwen. She was kneeling in the straw, her waterproofs thrown haphazardly over her pyjamas, wild blonde curls hanging over her face as she leaned her head down. The naked barn bulb cast its garish golden glow across her frame, drawing long, ghostly shadows across her face. And in her lap, the light caught off another figure. A cradled bundle of wet fur— the tiniest lamb Ghost had ever seen.

When Gwen looked up, Ghost could see that she was gently guiding a bottle into the lamb's mouth.

They looked at one another for a beat. The lightbulb overhead fizzed. From Gwen's lap, the lamb sighed softly around its bottle.

Gwen smiled. "Canny sleep?" she asked.

Ghost felt a little caught-out. Slowly, he nodded.

"Been up too long maself," she sighed. "Wanna meet our newest?"

Ghost joined her in the pen, trying to ignore the familiar, awkward

apprehension that tugged at his movements. Gwen nodded, once at the animal in her lap, then again at the ground in front of her.

Ghost sank to his knees opposite the two of them and looked properly at the lamb for the first time. It was a small white creature, mottled with patches of brown along its limbs, its dark eyes enormous and wet in its tiny pale face. It was still damp, coated in a slipperiness that rumbled the fur around its face.

“Born a few hours ago,” Gwen whispered, adjusting her grip on the bottle. “Poor laddie’s had a rough start.”

Ghost stayed quiet, watching with fascination as the lamb squirmed.

She continued, absentmindedly stroking one hand along the animal’s jaw as she fed him.

“His mammy’s not well, so I’m givin’ him a wee hand.”

The lamb coughed. She removed the end of the bottle from his mouth and let him wriggle into a more comfortable position, shifting between her knees. Ghost could hear the tiny noises of protest he made— they were endearing sounds, unlike anything he’d ever heard before.

“He was a twin, y’know,” Gwen said. “I didnae realise the ewe was sick. Milk fever. Couldnae feed a single one of them. By the time I came up...he was the only one...”

Ghost looked up at her as she trailed off. He already knew the answer to the question he didn’t ask. Instead, he watched as she chewed the inside of her lip for a long moment, acknowledging the silence.

Then, she said, “it’s easy to forget the bad side of all this.”

Ghost blinked. “What d’you mean?”

She heaved another sigh, as if she was trying to dislodge something heavy out of her lungs.

“Doin’ this job, working with the animals and bringin’ in new life... it’s special. So special. But for all that—” she gestured her free hand vaguely around the barn, “there’s so much death, in all of it. Y’know, we lose about six percent of all our lambs? Lose mothers, sometimes, too. Some of it’s inevitable. And then some of it’s like tonight— ye fuck up, it costs ye a real life.”

She paused, her face drawn, and put down the lamb's milk bottle.

Ghost watched her. "You can't blame yourself every time you fuck it up. It happens."

"Aye...yeah."

She eyed him briefly. "Sorry. I know I shouldnae complain. Farming's my life. I love it more'n anything else. It's nothin' like what ye do... well, John's told me stories."

Ghost paused for a moment, letting Gwen's words burrow their way into his bones.

"Do you like it?" Gwen asked quietly. "What you do?"

"No." The answer was right there, in an instant.

In Gwen's lap, the lamb bleated. She smiled softly at it, letting it stagger to its feet. Then she looked back at Ghost, her expression complicated.

"How do you stand it then?" she asked.

Ghost said, more to himself than Gwen, "I don't really think I do."

Silence swelled around them for a while. The lamb potted around the large pen, searching aimlessly for its mother. The space was a lot emptier than it had been a few weeks ago, when they arrived. More and more lambs populated the fields outside. After scouring the perimeter once, twice, moving with juvenile galumphing steps, the lamb gave up its search and came to settle back at Gwen's side. He butted the side of her thigh with his head feebly, then, in an instant, fell asleep.

Gwen traced the shape of his face with a loving hand.

"I think the farm's been doin' you good, Simon."

Ghost thought about that statement, feeling a little at odds. The way he'd come to feel on the farm was unlike any emotion he'd ever experienced before. He felt like overturned earth, something loamy and fresh uprooted from a dry and cracked exterior.

It was vulnerability, tender and sore, something he'd never allowed himself to feel before. And it hurt him— every day tore open more deep, aching wounds that he'd tried his best not to acknowledge for

years. It should have ruined him. It was ruining him.

But in the wake of it all...

Inevitably, his thoughts turned back to Johnny.

Johnny, who had been there to see him come apart, falling to pieces like a wood-rotted effigy, choking on his own terror, time and time again.

And he'd still looked at him like he understood. He'd still wanted Ghost's skin beneath his touch.

"I think..." Ghost started. The truth of the words was thick and hard to speak aloud. "I think you're right."

—

They walked back to the house together. Two pale spectres in the darkness, side-by-side.

As they walked, Gwen hummed softly, some lilting reel that Ghost had never heard before. The melody of it sounded like it had come from the hills themselves— each note felt right home in the vast landscape that surrounded them.

As they approached the courtyard, she stopped.

"Yer leavin' in a couple days, yeah?"

Ghost stopped too, a half-step behind her. He hadn't let himself acknowledge the time that passed fully until now. "Yeah."

"Right. Well... I'll expect you back, next year. The two of ye."

Responding was a promise he couldn't bring himself to make. Gwen seemed to understand the silence, or at least a part of it, and she smiled sadly. Ghost made to keep walking, trying his best to escape the anxiety that their conversation was drawing up inside of him, but then she spoke again.

"You two— look out for each other when yer back, ye hear?"

He could feel something acidic churn in his stomach. "It doesn't work like that."

Gwen didn't back down. "You'll try. I know he will, too."

Ghost levelled her a sharp gaze. "I can't do that. He's gotta look out for himself."

"I know that," Gwen said. "But still..."

She faltered, then continued slowly, a new kind of resolve ringing clear in her tone. "Y'know, every time my phone rings, Simon, I swear it's 'cause of him. That they're gonnae tell me they've found him somewhere shot to bits, or wi' his fuckin' guts hangin' out, or some other awful thing. That they've already buried him."

She twisted her hands together, her knuckles white, scarred skin stretched taut over hard-worked bones. "D'ye understand wha' I mean?"

Ghost just looked at her, feeling bile scrape its burning fingers up the lining of his throat.

"What I mean is that sometimes I find maself treatin' him like he's already dead," Gwen said quietly. "An' I think he knows it."

She met his gaze head-on. Her eyes were so blue, but colder than Johnny's. Like frozen-over pools of water, striking and threatening, they beckoned the observer with an unsuspecting heavy step forwards, without warning about the bottomless depth of water that lurked beneath the icy surface. Ghost couldn't look away.

Gwen didn't smile this time, just pressed her lips together in an approximation of compassion.

"Don't let the same thing happen wi' you. He doesn't deserve it. An' you don't either."

He wasn't sure what to say to that. He could feel the weight of the statement pulling at him, forcing him to acknowledge it. He knew she was right, in a way. It was too late for him to be so afraid.

He couldn't run forever.

—

It wasn't the last time he was interrupted at night. As the end of their leave closed in, Ghost's nights continued to stretch longer than the days.

That night, he gasped awake around a lungful of blood. The acrid

taste of it choked him and he scratched blindly at his throat, panic directing his movements. It burned inside him, a searing, unquenchable feeling.

When he was awake and no longer shaking, he catalogued a pitiful few hours' sleep and left his room.

The hallway wasn't empty.

Johnny stood at the far end, by the window next to his bedroom, a dimly lit, formless phantom in the night. He was framed by the light cast in by the moon, glancing off his outline. His back was turned to Ghost as he gazed out towards the farm, elbows perched on the sill.

Ghost closed his bedroom door with a soft click, and Johnny turned.

"Simon— hey. Hope I didn't wake ye."

There was something a little comical about the nonchalance in his voice. Both of them stood at opposite end of the hallway, sleep-rumpled and vulnerable in their nightclothes. It was completely unlike any ground they'd ever seen each other on before. Uncharted territory. Ghost's heart squeezed oddly in his chest.

"No, you didn't." he asked, doing his best to mirror Johnny's tone.

Belatedly, he asked, "everything alright?"

Johnny nodded, almost sheepish. "Aye. Just.. couldnae sleep. S'pose it's the same fer you?"

Ghost didn't respond. With quiet steps, he moved through the hall, joining Johnny by the window. He looked out into the courtyard below. Facing them was Gwen's cottage, a white limestone face obscured by a thick tangle of ivy, windows shut and lights off. Beyond the house, he could see the barn, peeking its head over the cottage's roof. A glimmer of light shone from it, barely visible, an indication of movement within, making three unrestful inhabitants that night. Gwen was probably kneeling in the straw pen again, trying with muted grief to keep her last twin lamb alive.

He wondered what it was that kept them all awake. Perhaps it was the same for all of them. Consciousness of endings. He and Johnny would be leaving before this time tomorrow. Finality, and the awareness— *fear*— of it, never settled well in people's minds. He'd come to understand that intimately.

“You go out there every night?” Johnny asked quietly, eyes trained on the sliver of light from the barn.

Ghost’s gaze slipped away from the farm, finding Johnny’s profile instead. “Yeah.”

“Does it help?”

“A little.”

“Can I ask...” Johnny said slowly, “what do you dream about?”

He turned to look at him as he spoke.

Ghost shouldn’t have answered. Shouldn’t have wanted to. But he spoke, almost instantly.

“Lots of things,” he said. “Past things. Sometimes it’s you.”

The quiet cover of the midnight half-darkness was dangerous. It felt like a layer of protection, allowing him to be too honest.

Too honest. Ghost never thought the words could apply to himself.

“Me?” Johnny echoed.

He nodded.

“Does tha’ scare you?” Johnny asked, knowing too much already.

“Sometimes.”

There was a beat. Johnny shifted his weight, straightening from where he’d been leaning.

“Simon,” Johnny began. “Are we ever gonnae talk about it?”

There it was. The end, the precipice, the one conflict he couldn’t bring himself to acknowledge.

“What is there to talk about?”

Johnny made a noise that was half laugh, half sob. “*Come on.* You can’t keep pretending it didn’t happen. We can’t leave here an’ go back to our lives and ignore it forever. This isn’t.... this isn’t just friendship anymore. You know that.”

He cursed himself for his spinelessness. "I know."

"So what do we do about it?"

There were two parts to Ghost's mind. There was the real version of himself, and the version of himself he *forced* to be real. The version he forced to the front of his mind was loud, demanding order, propriety, contingency plans. That was the part of him that spoke. "Nothing. We should do nothing."

And then the real version of himself, the one that he'd thought he'd left buried in that shallow grave, writhed within him, wracked with agony, as he watched Johnny's face fall into shuttered nothingness.

"Should, aye." Johnny laughed a little. It was almost sad, the sound of it, muted and regretful. He waited just a moment longer, eyes scanning Ghost's face. It was like a spark had gone out in his expression, and he looked away, mouth drawn thin and tight.

"Sorry. You're... right. I'll let you get on."

And then he turned, pushing his bedroom door open.

That real version of himself, that version that he'd tried so hard to make nameless, tore free.

"Wait," Simon said.

Trembling hands grasped Johnny's wrist. How fragile it felt, that tender expanse of skin beneath Simon's calloused fingers, soft and translucent and exposing the bluish tint of veins running beneath.

"Stay." His whispered tone was just above pleading.

Johnny looked at him. Simon could feel his heartbeat beneath his fingers. "Stay with me."

Almost unconsciously, he stepped forwards into Johnny's space. Johnny didn't move, didn't shake him off, just let his gaze dip low over Simon's chest, then up to his chin, his mouth, his eyes.

"This isn't *fair*. I know what I want. But you...I have no idea what you want, Simon. "

The words needled into him, deadly sharp, and they sent a surge of regret coursing through him. He wanted, absurdly, to shake Johnny, to make him understand. It should be *obvious*. It felt obvious.

Maybe he'd lived with these feelings for too long. They'd saturated him, become such an indelible part of him, that maybe he'd left a little too much unspoken.

He slid his hand up Johnny's wrist, fingers catching on the fabric of his sleeve. He could hear the way they both breathed, a sound like the swell of waves, anticipation, uncertainty, expectation infused into each draw of their lungs.

He tugged Johnny close, searching for an answer in the crook of his neck, letting the smell of sleep and woodsmoke draw him in.

It was an art he hadn't practiced. A language he didn't understand. It was already too much for him, this complicated dance, pushing the limits of the emotions that his mind could take before it finally cracked in two.

Johnny was a shock-absorber. A lightning rod in soft ground.

He felt a hand slide across the planes of his back. Johnny's fingers were featherlight, cataloguing the slopes of his spine, marking each rib, tracing the ridge of his scapula. Simon felt his skin shiver.

He thought about the versions of them that existed far away from here, blood-soaked and broken.

It didn't feel real, any of it.

He wished he could cleave himself in two, to somehow sever the parts of him that begged for the safety of a dark mask, the parts that fed on violence and fear, the heart that had learned to beat in the rhythm of the spaces between gunfire. He wished he could leave a phantom of himself behind, here, face pressed into Johnny's shoulder, feeling that fluttering pulse against his cheek, his soul lost somewhere in the crags of a mountain that watched him sleep.

"Simon..." Johnny's voice was so different, pressed this close. He asked again, "what do you want?"

His tone sounded like he already knew the answer.

Did *Simon*?

He wanted to gut the feelings that roared inside him and be done with it.

He wanted to tear himself apart piece by piece until there was no evidence that he'd ever existed in the first place.

He wanted to consume Johnny whole.

Longing, more intense than anything he'd ever known, crashed into forefront of his mind. It burned through his nerve endings, a need he'd never once acknowledged, and he surged forwards suddenly, his mouth finding Johnny's, closing the distance between them with a frantic tug of Johnny's shoulders.

Johnny gasped into the heat of his mouth, shock and then urgency, following Simon's movements.

It wasn't an answer. Neither of them cared. Two starving creatures, suddenly allowed a taste of satiation.

Simon pulled Johnny's bedroom door closed behind him.

The ease with which he opened up struck low and electric inside him as he felt the slide of Johnny's tongue against his own. He drank the feeling of it in, taking everything Johnny offered him, how he was always so damn eager to please, so pliant. Johnny let himself be dragged forwards into Simon's space, following him as Simon's knees hit the edge of Johnny's mattress and he sank down.

One of Johnny's hands braced against the bed, the other skating up his side as he clambered over him, suspended above him with his knees digging into the mattress on either side of Simon's waist.

Simon tugged him forward again until Johnny finally gave way, settling into his lap with a choked-off noise. "Simon-" he breathed. "*Simon.*"

Heat flared in Simon's gut, answering finally to the name he thought he'd lost. He palmed the side of Johnny's neck as he kissed him, open-mouthed and urgent, absorbing the ruined noises that escaped from Johnny's throat with frantic enthusiasm.

He shifted then, propping himself up on one hand, the other sliding down the length of Johnny's arm, encircling his wrist as his mouth left Johnny's and found purchase along the sharp line of his jaw. The smell of him, something warm and so keenly alive, was almost intoxicating in its familiarity, Simon realised as he trailed kisses along the expanse of Johnny's throat.

Memories of countless nights bled into his mind. The two of them curled up against one another in ruined safe-houses. Long-winded stakeouts in cramped rooms with their knees knocked together. Quiet promises shared while their shoulders brushed in darkened corners. It ached, knowing Johnny had always been there, always held himself close enough to Simon, that the feel of him, the way they moved in tandem, felt a little less like uncharted ground, and a little more like coming home.

The cascade of emotions in his chest torrented, blending into an overwhelming, sickening mass. With his chest heaving, he pulled away.

Johnny drew in a shuddering breath. He looked *wrecked* already, pupils blown wide, the pull of something dark and deep visible in his expression.

They breathed heavily into the silence. Johnny's weight was an anchor in Simon's lap, keeping him tethered to reality.

Slowly, Johnny's shoulders sagged, and he tipped his head into Simon's chest.

"*God*," he sighed, succinct and completely correct. "You... you alright?"

Another breath tore itself free from Simon's lungs.

"I..."

His thoughts had dried to ash inside him. He couldn't form them into words, so he settled for tracing the edge of Johnny's clavicle with his thumb instead, feeling the pulse that ricocheted beneath it.

Johnny touched the back of his hand with shaking fingers, his chest rising and falling. There was a flush creeping high up his neck, deep and hot and perfect. "Simon."

"Johnny," he breathed.

"Is this what we're doing?"

Each word was spoken closer to his mouth, until their lips were barely touching.

"I don't know," Simon said, the proximity drawing a rush of agonised

confession to the surface inside him. His hand left Johnny's collarbone, his movements becoming unsteady and desperate again. "I don't know. I can't... Johnny, you've ruined me. I never know, with you."

Johnny just sighed against his mouth, and they fell into one another again. Letting their questions stay unanswered, he pulled Johnny into a deep, lasting kiss.

The next morning, the sun shone for the first time in days.

Long fingers of sunshine stretched through the window, spilling honeyed light across bare skin in the gentlest of caresses. Johnny shifted in his sleep, curled around Simon's side, like an extension of his own body— another limb, or another set of lungs, another heart. Seeing him hurt almost too much to bear.

Memories of the half-light washed over him like a shower of rain. He could still feel the heat of Johnny's hands on his skin. Tangled together, the way they were now, it was far too easy to get lost in the phantoms of sensation.

Simon lay awake for a long time in the sun, feeling time stretch and slow around him. He was grateful for the feeling. So much of his time had been occupied by counting down— it was nice to let the minutes drop by lazily.

Eventually, Johnny moved again, melting slowly into consciousness beside him. He rolled onto his back, then shifted upright with groggy, slow movements, meeting Simon's gaze over his shoulder with bleary eyes.

"Morning," he said, his voice scratchy with sleep.

Their thighs were still touching beneath the sheet. Neither of them made an effort to move away.

Johnny cracked a grin, one side of his cheek dimpling as he regarded Ghost. "Fancy a lie-in, eh?"

Simon shrugged, feigning indifference, but he shifted to make more room for Johnny nonetheless. The mattress dipped beneath them as the man settled in next to him, skin touching skin, warmth pooling between them.

The silence that settled over them was heavy, but content, like a blanket shielding them from the rest of the world, from the realities they had yet to acknowledge.

More time passed, slipping by slowly, honey-thick.

“What happens now?” Johnny asked after a long while, his voice rasping and quiet.

“Dunno. Coffee?”

A little crease formed between Johnny eyebrows. “Aye, ya fuckin’ numpty. I mean... after today. When we get back.”

Simon sighed heavily, feeling the way that same old anxiety tensed his diaphragm. But he’d run out of excuses. He pushed through the feeling, letting his breathing even out as he sat up, and faced Johnny’s complicated expression.

“Depends.” He said. It was a pathetic start to an endless answer, but it was the start of something nonetheless; letting Johnny in.

Johnny sat up properly opposite him, crossed knees knocking against his own.

“Johnny,” Simon continued. “It’s never gonna be...” he struggled for a moment. There was no word for it, what he wanted to say.

Enough? This small semblance of closeness was already enough for Simon, ten times over. *Good?* What did it mean, for a relationship to be good?

He gave up. Instead, tentatively, he said, “we can’t want any more than this.”

It was a lie. One they were both willing to overlook.

Johnny’s voice was thin. “And what is it, exactly, that you do want?”

That same question again.

What did he want?

Everything. All of it. I want your heart in my chest instead of mine. I want to be the one who kills you, just so I can make it soft. I want you to be the one to kill me, because I know you’ll close my eyes.

I want you to look at me and see the truth and stay anyway.

It was something like greed, that insatiable hunger inside him. He could never fully vocalise it.

“I just...” He felt the tension that curled beneath Johnny’s skin as he ghosted a kiss over his shoulder. “I just want this.”

Johnny’s hand came up from behind and curled in his hair, blunt fingernails stroking his scalp. He sighed heavily. “I want this, too.”

The perpetual quietness welled up between them again, bogged down with words left unsaid. Johnny’s hand trailed blindly down the nape of Simon’s neck, drawing a tremor through his frame.

Then, with a quiet voice that was laced through with terror, Johnny asked him, “it’s love, isn’t it? For you too?”

Love. He’d never said it out loud before. The realisation drew a strange feeling out of him— fear, but also relief, like cool water slicking across burned skin.

“It is,” he whispered.

Johnny’s face softened, melting into something delicate and beautiful. Then he sighed. “I wish we could-” he began, then stopped suddenly, catching the last few words before they could take shape in the silence.

Simon nodded anyway, one hand smoothing down Johnny’s side, pulling him close again. “I know.”

The next sentence seemed difficult for Johnny to get out, his teeth worrying his bottom lip for a long time before he spoke. “I just wish we could take it with us. Let it be... more than jus’ this.”

A terrible, sharp feeling crawled in Simon’s gut.

“Johnny...”

He tried to be okay with it, the way every word they spoke was unfinished. The way each sentence trailed into an ellipses, a bated breath that danced around the inevitable conclusion.

And then what? Their silence begged. The eternal question.

He didn’t know the answer.

The end of their leave loomed, a silent, ticking time bomb they’d

become so good at ignoring. With it threatened the harsh bite of reality— that whatever it was that they held between them in the fragile quiet of these mountains, existed as a pipe-dream at best, and a death sentence at worst.

They couldn't feed on each other's promises. Love, loss, time, trust. They weren't built for any of it. They weren't supposed to carry it all back with them.

But...

They *had* this. This warm, molten April morning, with its golden light, the dust-motes drifting lazily through the air. The heat of their bodies pressed together. Their impossible, sacred understanding of each other.

And Simon thought he might be able to live with it, this shared existence in a sea of uncertainty.

Time and distance might stretch the intensity of this moment thin, but he knew that they could never really leave it behind. He'd always live here, come back to rest between those rolling hills, into the space between Johnny's body and his.

He'd always have the imprint of Johnny's mouth against his own. He'd know what he looked like when he slept peacefully. Johnny would know what he sounded like when he told the truth— he'd know him in a way Simon didn't even know himself.

"We could try," Simon whispered into Johnny's hair, tugging him close. Holding him tighter than he ever had before.

It might kill us. It might be the end of everything.

"We could make it work."

—

The shudder of the helicopter blades whirled the scent of hot tarmac high into the air. Around him, the compound was alive with the sounds of radio chatter and orders shouted downwind, but the drone of the helo's machine-song hum was loudest of all.

Ghost readjusted his kit, shifting the weight of his tac vest forwards, tightening the side-straps as he walked. Everything was too warm. August heat, thick and dead, laved its sweat-slicked fingers over his

skin, a constant reminder of the time that passed. Summer was dying, and it wasn't going without a fight.

"There you are. We were 'bout ta leave without you!"

Johnny's voice was almost lost to the cacophony of noise. But as Ghost approached the helo, it singled out to him, washing over him like a swell of cool water. A sense of relief. He breathed in, breathed out, settled into himself.

"Alright, Sergeant?" There was a bite to the words, a shared grin underneath the meaning. Their own private understanding.

"Better now," Johnny said, leaning in close to throw the words into Ghost's ear. "Would've saved a seat for ye, anyway."

Simon smiled beneath his mask, feeling that now-familiar spark in his chest as it glowed, and followed Johnny onto the loading ramp.

A lot had changed in the last few months, but, at the same time, nothing at all had. Ghost took his seat next to Johnny, their legs brushing just a little closer than they should have, and he felt the hairs on his neck raise as Johnny whispered some nonsense remark into the space they shared between them.

It was almost a rebirth. Like the direction of life reversed, from dead and buried, to new and electrifying—the revelation that had begun when he'd seen the first ever lamb born on the farm had grown inside him, and he felt a little more comfortable in his understanding now. Everything that him and Johnny were built on was the same as it had always been, just molded into a new shape.

Some days, it was still too terrifying. Some days, Simon retreated into his fear, some days Johnny couldn't parse meaning out of his silences. Sometimes it was frustration, shutting down, anxiety.

But most days, it was this:

Johnny's hand, sparking over the nape of Simon's neck in the cover of half-darkness before exfil. Missions worked in tandem, bandages placed with gentle touch on fresh wounds, weighted comms check-ins. Simon's own name, that he'd once thought long-dead, resurrected time and time again as a heated whisper in his ear. Knowing, seeing, understanding one another. They were still mapping the corners of this. Perpetually, something new would arise, blindsiding them both, threatening to tip the precarious balance of the relationship they'd

carved out of one another. But despite that, despite every unknown, they stumbled through together.

And at night, when they slept, curled against one another in secret, Simon dreamed of mountains.

Chapter End Notes

And it's done! I can't really believe it, tbh. This is the first multichapter fic i've ever planned out and actually committed to, so there's certainly been a learning curve for me. I'm still such a newbie when it comes to writing fic haha.

I want to thank you wholeheartedly for reading. This has been such a lovely experience, I've loved getting to explore this little universe with everyone. I started mapping this story out in my head in late march, when I was actually working on a sheep farm (!), and it's grown and culminated into something I'm very proud of. :) The premise felt very niche to my own life, so I wasn't sure if people would be onboard with it, but the response has been so overwhelmingly positive and it's meant so much to me. Thank you so much. <3

Until next time :)

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